

**NOMINATIONS OF BRIG. GEN. ALLISON HICKEY TO BE UNDER
SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS AND STEVE MURO TO BE UNDER
SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

APRIL 6, 2011

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NOMINATIONS OF BRIG. GEN. ALLISON HICKEY TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS AND STEVE MURO TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6, 2011

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:35 a.m., in room 418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Patty Murray, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Murray, Webb, Tester, Begich, Isakson, Brown of Massachusetts, and Moran.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. PATTY MURRAY, CHAIRMAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WASHINGTON**

Chairman MURRAY. Good morning and welcome to today's hearing to consider nominations of Brigadier General Allison A. Hickey to be Under Secretary for Benefits and Steve Muro to be Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

Before we begin, I do want to make one quick announcement about a step this Committee is taking to both embrace new technology and save Committee funds on those endless stacks of paper that we get on our desk that we all know about.

Today marks the first Committee hearing that Members will be using tablets like this. Everyone of us has one up here so that we can digitally reduce all of those piles of paperwork and have it available for our Members and our staff as well.

As Chairman I believe it is important, particularly at a time when we are counting on the VA to make some big overdue changes in terms of IT, that we, as the Committee, are also taking whatever steps we can to improve and share information.

So we are very excited about this step even while we will all try to get used to it. I am told that we are the first Committee in the Senate to make these changes, and I hope it will be the first of many for this Committee that is really aimed at improving our hearings and access to information and resources for our veterans.

And we will be training our Committee Members, Senator Isakson, how to use these tablets. But it is going to be a great change for us, and we are looking forward to having them help save money for the Senate too.

General Hickey, thank you for being here and welcome. I want to say at the outset that I commend you for accepting this nomination because, if confirmed, you will have a tremendously difficult job in front of you. Without question, I believe that the VA disability claims system is broken.

It is broken when we have veterans waiting an average of 190 days for a claim to be adjudicated. It is broken when we have nearly one million veterans currently caught in a backlog that continues to climb, and it is broken when our veterans have simply lost faith in the system.

If confirmed, you will you be looked upon to fix this broken system and to reduce the skyrocketing backlog of claims that it has produced. You will be asked to think boldly about a problem that has vexed your predecessors. You will need to move quickly on innovative solutions, including viable technological changes, if we are going to begin to turn this problem around. It will not be easy. In fact, just last month I got a first-hand look at the problem that you face.

I went out to Seattle to go to the Seattle Regional VA Office, and I saw the impact that paper alone has on an employee's ability to process a claim. I saw these huge files that were as thick as a phone book and completely devoid of any organization whatsoever that made it impossible to find anything in them, and even harder to move to a paperless file. I heard about claims that should be getting expedited treatment but that were not.

In fact, it took the Seattle Regional Office nearly 9 months to expedite the claim for a veteran that was terminally ill with cancer, and that veteran's claim was finally granted, 3 days after the veteran died.

That is totally unacceptable, and it has to change. Our veterans, especially those who are most vulnerable, those who are terminally ill or homeless or in danger of becoming homeless, deserve better than the way that some VA offices are treating them, and I know from my many years on this Committee this problem is not in just one pocket of the country. It is widespread.

The problems I saw in Seattle are not just an isolated incident. It is one example of a problem that has plagued the VA. And it is a problem that is growing.

Although the VA knew that more Agent Orange claims would be coming into the system, the claims have still overwhelmed the new case workers that Congress provided funding to hire.

The VA knows more and more OIF and OEF veterans will be making claims, and we need assurance that VA is preparing for this influx of new claims.

General Hickey, while I am impressed by the credentials you bring to this job, I have to believe this is a job like no other you have had before and a challenge that you may not face again. But it is one of the biggest we have to meet.

If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with you to address this issue because we cannot allow our veterans to wait for the benefits they have earned any longer.

Mr. Muro, welcome, thank you to you for joining with us today.

Mr. Muro, if confirmed, you will be responsible for maintaining the high-level of service and customer satisfaction in the National

Cemetery Administration. Obviously, over the last year, and again last week, we have read with horror about the disgraceful management of Arlington National Cemetery.

Unorganized records and sloppy management have led to a tragedy not only for the families of servicemembers buried on those hallowed grounds but for our country as a whole. We must get Arlington on track.

Arlington must become known as a place of comfort to families, efficiency of administration, and a model of customer service equal to that of VA's National Cemeteries, which you will be tasked with managing.

I look forward to hearing from you about what we can do to make sure that these management failures never happen at our VA cemeteries.

I also look forward to discussing the other challenges you will face, including meeting the unprecedented need for additional capacity in heavily populated urban areas.

As a housekeeping note, after the Members give their opening statements, I will swear in our nominees, then introduce them. I will then ask each of you to introduce any friends or families that are with you today. Our nominees will then give their opening statements, then Members will have a chance to ask questions.

So again, General Hickey, thank you very much.

Mr. Muro, thank you for being here. I look forward to your testimony.

With that, I turn it over to Senator Isakson, who is standing in for Senator Burr today.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JOHNNY ISAKSON,
U.S. SENATOR FROM GEORGIA**

Senator ISAKSON. Thank you very much, Madam Chairman.

Today, we will discuss the qualifications of the nominees to serve in two demanding roles at the Veterans Administration. General Allison Hickey and Steve Muro, both of whom I have met and enjoyed very much meeting. I appreciate, as the Chairman said, their commitment to the job ahead of them.

General Hickey, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) provides a range of benefits and services to help improve the lives of veterans and their families and their survivors. But, in some areas, VBA struggles to deliver effective benefits and services without hassles or delays. Primarily, VBA's disability claims processing, which the Chairman has already mentioned, has been criticized for many years for large backlogs, long delays, and inaccurate decisions. And the problems are expected to get even worse with the volume of veterans returning.

Between 2009 and 2012, the number of pending claims is projected to more than double, and the average time it takes to complete a claim is expected to increase by nearly 70 days. Getting this situation under control has to be your top priority.

To that end, VA has a number of IT solutions and other initiatives underway. But we must make sure VA has a realistic and comprehensive plan to pull these efforts together so there will be lasting improvements in VA's ability to provide accurate and good

services. Veterans in Georgia and across the country deserve no less.

Another challenge is the large difference in service provided by VA's regional offices around the country. Some consistently meet expectations, while others struggle. As the VFW put it, "The real question is why these vast differences exist between regional offices? Is it management? Is it training? Or is it leadership?" We need answers to those questions and, more importantly, we need solutions.

VA is also working with the Department of Defense to roll out an Integrated Disability Evaluation System, which allows injured servicemembers to find out what benefits they will get from both agencies before being medically discharged.

And I might interject—I am reading a prepared statement for Senator Burr—but I wanted to interject a statement here, if I might.

I commend General Schumacher's work in the seamless transition from active DOD medical health care to veterans health care that has taken place at the Augusta Charlie Norwood Center. That transition has helped veterans to transfer from DOD care to veterans' care with a seamless system where they do not fall between the cracks, and I commend General Schumacher on what he has done. I hope you find him, General Hickey, to be of help to you in your transition.

General Hickey, if confirmed, these are just a few of the pressing issues you would find ahead of you at the Veterans Benefits Administration. I look forward to discussing your plans to tackle them, and I again thank you for your willingness to serve—I am willing to help in any way I can to facilitate and make the job as easy as possible.

Mr. Muro, thank you for your service to the country and your willingness to take on a very, very important duty. As you know well, VA's National Cemetery Administration has the solemn mission of honoring and memorializing our Nation's fallen heroes. For veterans of every generation, it is the aim of our grateful Nation to provide a final resting place worthy of their sacrifices and to respectfully tend to their grieving loved ones.

As shown in the recognition NCA has received for high levels of customer service, NCA has been diligently fulfilling that role. But, as the Chairman mentioned, the issues that have come to light at Arlington National Cemetery should remind all of us how critical it is to remain vigilant so that veterans and their families receive the top-notch service they deserve, now and in the future.

Mr. Muro, I look forward to serving with you. You will have the pleasure of working with a former U.S. Senator from Georgia, now head of the Battle Monuments Commission, Senator Max Cleland, who is a dear personal friend of mine. My predecessor in this seat, Zell Miller, was actually a board member of the Battle Monuments Commission for a while. So, we have a long tradition in Georgia.

We recently opened—and you were there, if I am not mistaken—the new veterans cemetery on the mountaintop in north Georgia, which is probably, of all that I have seen around the country, the most breathtaking and beautiful cemetery that we have in the entire VA.

So thank you for your willingness, Mr. Muro.
 General Hickey, that you for yours.
 And Madam Chairman, I yield back the remainder of my time.
 Chairman MURRAY. Thank you very much.
 If any of our Members have an opening statement, if you make
 it real quick, we can get to our nominees.
 Senator Tester.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JON TESTER,
 U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA**

Senator TESTER. I will be quick.
 Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Senator Isakson, for
 your comments. I will not be repetitive, but I would like to asso-
 ciate myself with both of them.
 I want to thank you guys for being here. I want to thank you for
 your willingness to serve. I will tell you that last week General
 Shinseki was in front of the Appropriations Committee. Mr. Muro,
 you were there too. Three of the six of his top people were not con-
 firmed at that point in time but were on that panel.
 I think it is incumbent upon the Administration to put good peo-
 ple in front of us in a timely manner. I think it is incumbent upon
 us to get you confirmed in a timely manner, and I look forward to
 your testimony and your confirmation.
 Thank you.
 Chairman MURRAY. Thank you very much.
 Senator Moran.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MORAN,
 U.S. SENATOR FROM KANSAS**

Senator MORAN. Madam Chair, thank you very much. I am very
 honored to be a Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Com-
 mittee. I served for 14 years in the House as a Member of that
 companion Committee, and there is no group of Americans I hold
 in higher regard than those who have served our country.
 I am pleased to see that we have such high-quality nominees and
 look forward to developing a good working relationship with you on
 behalf of the 250,000 veterans in Kansas and those all across the
 country.
 I thank you for your military service to our country, and thank
 you for your willingness to serve others who have served.
 Thank you.
 Chairman MURRAY. Thank you very much.
 Under the rules of this Committee, the testimony of all Presi-
 dential nominees appearing before the Committee shall be taken
 under oath.
 So, General Hickey and Mr. Muro, will you now stand for the ad-
 ministration of the oath.
 Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give
 before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs will be the truth,
 the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?
 General HICKEY. Yes.
 Mr. MURO. Yes.
 Chairman MURRAY. Thank you very much.

With that, I will introduce both of our nominees and turn to them for their opening statements.

Each of these nominees, if confirmed, will play an integral role in the overall management and day-to-day operation of the VA. So I am delighted to have the opportunity to have you before us today.

General Hickey is a 27-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force, active National Guard and Reserve. She is also a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, class of 1980, the first class to include women.

She has served as a pilot and aircraft commander and led the Air Force's Future Total Force Office and served as the Assistant Deputy Director for Air Force strategic planning, leading one of the largest mission and culture change efforts the Air Force has ever gone through.

She currently serves as a human capital management executive for Accenture and has led a team focused on thousands of personnel actions every day, ranging from recruitment to retirement.

Mr. Muro is a Vietnam veteran who served in the U.S. Navy from 1968 to 1972, beginning his career with the VA as a maintenance mechanic at the West Los Angeles VA Hospital in 1975, joining the National Cemetery Administration in 1978.

Over the next 30 years, he moved up through the ranks in progressively more responsible positions, working in cemeteries nationwide. As Acting Director and then Director of the Office of Field Programs from 2002 through 2008, Mr. Muro created a number of proactive programs that have improved the quality of cemetery administration to the high level in place today.

In 2008, he became the Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, and, in 2009, he became the Acting Under Secretary.

With that, General Hickey, do you have any family or friends you would like to introduce before we do opening statements?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Chairman Murray, for the introduction. I would like to introduce my family who is here today, beginning with my father, Lieutenant General William J. Hilsman, behind me here, who was a career Army officer and also a Vietnam veteran himself.

My mother, Mrs. Jean Hilsman, is a past president of the National Military Family Association and DOD's first family policy office director.

My husband, Colonel Rob Hickey, is a 30-year veteran himself and continues his service to the government working in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

My oldest son, Tyler Hickey, graduates from James Madison University in May. My daughter, Chelsea Hickey, graduates from Virginia Tech in May, and my youngest son, Michael Hickey, is our ninth grader and just completing his Eagle Scout grade.

With me also in the room are my sisters, Mrs. Karen Paul and Mrs. Donna Link, and their husbands, Lieutenant Colonel retired Skip Paul and Wesley Link, and my brother Bill Hilsman.

Chairman MURRAY. OK. Mr. Muro.

Mr. MURO. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

I would like to introduce my family: Dr. Linda Johnson and Amanda Muro. Also I would like to acknowledge my son, Steve; my daughter-in-law, Rebecca; and my grandson, Stevie, who are out in California.

I would also like to acknowledge some of the NCA colleagues of mine and the Honorable William Tuerk.

Thank you.

Chairman MURRAY. That explains the jammed audience today. Very good.

Thank you both very much for appearing before the Committee.

General Hickey, we are going to start with you and your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF BRIGADIER GENERAL ALLISON A. HICKEY, USAF (RET.), NOMINEE TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

General HICKEY. Thank you, Chairman Murray.

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am deeply honored that President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have nominated me to join their leadership team as they transform the Department of Veterans Affairs to meet the emerging challenges of the 21st century.

I am eager for the opportunity to add my leadership, passion, and commitment to their efforts to continue to repay the debt of honor owed to the men and women, and their families, who have borne the battle.

I still remember the day in November 2009, when I heard Secretary Shinseki's inspiring remarks to thousands of military leaders about his vision for a VA that is people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking.

I heard his call to action to find an integrated approach that includes well-trained people, efficient and effective processes and proven new technologies all to deliver benefits and care for a changing population of veterans who bring increasingly complex needs to VA.

He spoke with compassion, conviction, and confidence that ignited my desire to again serve my country and shape my journey to this nomination hearing today. I humbly present myself to you today, bringing a deep commitment to veterans and a strong desire to join Secretary Shinseki's efforts to make bold and comprehensive changes that transform VA for the 21st century.

Before I continue, I want to recognize the over-35 years of service to veterans by the Acting Under Secretary for Benefits, Michael Walcoff, who is here today. Starting with VA as a claims examiner in Philadelphia in 1974, he culminates his distinguished career leading the Veterans Benefits Administration.

I am also deeply appreciative of the presence here today of our Veterans Service Organizations. If confirmed, I intend to continue VA's close collaboration with them as partners.

If confirmed as the Under Secretary for Benefits, I would be responsible for administering vital programs that provide support for veterans, their families, and survivors. Each program and benefit delivered can mean the difference between a roof over their heads, a college education, or a home that is retrofitted to accommodate a disability or a world without that support.

As a veteran myself, I have recent firsthand experience in transitioning to veteran status. As a result, I will never lose sight of the experiences of all our veterans and their families. This includes our National Guard and Reserve, who have honorably responded to their country's call in incredibly high numbers over the last decade.

As a woman veteran, I also recognize the growing population of women who have served their Nation admirably and are now seeking VA health care and benefits in record numbers. I understand we need a VA system that meets their needs, something I know is a priority for Secretary Shinseki and this Committee.

For over 30 years in government, military, and industry, including 17 years of leadership positions in DOD, I have worked in strategic and transformation planning, program implementation and organizational management.

I spent over 5 years in the Air National Guard's productivity and quality office, establishing a culture of process improvement for the organization.

I spent more than 7 years in the Air Force strategic planning office, where I led one of the largest mission and culture change efforts since the inception of that department, which affected more than 140 new units, and their new capabilities and moved billions of dollars to establish those new capabilities.

My recent industry experience includes a focus on areas directly related to VBA's core mission, including transactional business operations, customer relationship management, and experience with information technology systems that provide transparency, increase accountability, and speed the delivery of services to customers.

I believe that my past experience makes me highly qualified to manage the complexities and challenges of the claims transformation efforts currently underway at VBA, as well as other areas vital to our veterans' benefits.

If confirmed, eliminating the disability claims backlog and accomplishing the Secretary's goal of having no veteran wait more than 125 days for a quality decision with a 98 percent accuracy rate would be my central focus.

I have first-hand experience building and implementing transformational efforts, have focused on integrated solutions of people, process, and technology necessary to accomplish large complex goals.

If confirmed as Under Secretary for Benefits, I am committed to working with this Committee, the Congress more broadly, the veteran services organizations, the dedicated employees at VBA and other stakeholders to ensure that the VBA provides timely and quality benefits and services to America's heroes.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.

[The prepared statement of General Hickey follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF BRIG. GEN. ALLISON A. HICKEY (RET.), USAF, NOMINEE TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee: Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am deeply honored that President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have nominated me to join their leadership team as they transform the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to meet the emerging challenges of the 21st century. I am eager for the opportunity to add my leadership, passion and commitment to their efforts to continue to repay the debt of honor owed to the men and women, and their families who have "borne the battle." I still remember the day in November 2009, when I heard Secretary Shinseki's inspiring remarks to thousands of military leaders from all 54 States and Territories and the District of Columbia, about his vision for a Department of Veterans Affairs that is people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking. I heard his call to action to find an integrated approach that includes well-trained people, efficient and effective processes and proven new technologies all to deliver benefits and care for a changing population of Veterans who bring increasingly complex needs to VA. He spoke with a compassion, conviction and confidence that ignited my desire to again serve my country and shaped my journey to this nomination hearing today. I humbly present myself to you today—bringing a deep commitment to Veterans and a strong desire to join Secretary Shinseki's efforts to make bold and comprehensive changes that transform VA for the 21st century.

Before I continue, I want to briefly introduce my wonderful family with me today. They are part of what drives my passion to care for Veterans and their families. My father, Lieutenant General (Ret.) William J. Hilsman, served as a career Army Officer and is a Vietnam Veteran. My mother, Mrs. Jean Hilsman, served as a military mother and spouse, the first Director of the Department of Defense Family Policy Office and a Past President of the National Military Family Association. My husband, Colonel (Ret.) Rob Hickey, is a 30 year Veteran, who served as an A-10 and C-130 pilot, Logistics Group Commander, and who continues to serve the Nation working in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. And finally and most importantly, I am blessed to be the mother of three remarkable children—Tyler, Chelsea and Michael. Tyler and Chelsea both graduate in May from James Madison University and Virginia Tech respectively, both with a focus on public service careers. Soon to be awarded his Eagle Scout Rank, Michael is on the same path toward dedicated citizenry and service.

I also want to recognize the over 35 years of service to Veterans by the Acting Under Secretary for Benefits, Michael Walcoff. Starting with VA as a claims examiner in Philadelphia in 1974, he culminates his distinguished career leading over 20,000 dedicated employees of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Working closely with all of VA, Veterans Service Organizations, and Congress, he has been instrumental in laying critical foundations to "break the back of the backlog" and pursue other important initiatives that will improve service to Veterans.

I am also deeply appreciative of the presence here today of our Veterans Service Organizations. If confirmed, I intend to continue VA's close collaboration with them as partners—seeking opportunities to continue to enhance our interactions early in the improvement processes we explore for VBA. I will call upon their decades of experience and knowledge to help find and implement solutions for our Veterans, their families and survivors.

If confirmed as the Under Secretary for Benefits, I would be responsible for administering vitally significant programs that provide crucial support for Veterans, their families and survivors. Each program and benefit VBA delivers is important to those we serve. It can mean the difference between a roof over their heads, a college education, or a home that is retrofitted to accommodate a disability—or a world without that support. If confirmed, I will never lose sight of the importance of VBA's work on the individual lives of Veterans and their families.

As a Veteran myself, and a military family spouse, I have firsthand and recent experience in transitioning to Veteran status. Because of this background and my military family upbringing, the concerns of Veterans, their families, and survivors are never far from my mind and are close to my heart. This includes our National Guard and Reserve and their families who have honorably responded to their country's call in incredibly high numbers over the last decade and more, serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, and operations around the globe and here at home. I have the unique experience of serving in all three of the military components—Active, National Guard, and Reserve—and, if confirmed, I would work to ensure that VBA continues to support each of these groups of Veterans. As a woman Veteran, I also recognize the growing population of women who have served their Nation admirably and are now seeking VA health care and benefits in record numbers. I bring shared and unique experiences with this group of dedicated Veterans and an understanding that we need a VA system that meets their needs—something I know is a priority for Secretary Shinseki and this Committee.

For over 30 years in government, military, and industry—including 17 years of leadership positions in the Department of Defense—I have focused on strategic and

transformation planning, program implementation and organizational management. I have helped develop plans for major reorganization, restructuring, and refocusing of large-scale and complex organizations and programs to enable them to better meet their mission.

I believe that my past experience makes me highly qualified to manage the complexities and challenges of the claims transformation efforts currently underway, as well as other areas vital to our Veterans' benefits. Eliminating the disability claims backlog and accomplishing the Secretary's goal of having no Veteran wait more than 125 days for a quality decision with a 98% accuracy rate would be my central focus. I have firsthand experience building and implementing transformational efforts that focus on the integrated solution of people, process, and technology necessary to accomplish large complex goals. I spent over five years in the Air National Guard's Productivity and Quality office establishing a culture of process improvement, and over seven years in the Air Force Strategic Planning office leading major transformation efforts. In my experience with industry, process improvement and transformation were key to business performance results and client satisfaction levels. The "right" mix of focus on an integrated approach to people, process, and technology has been at the center of much of the work in my career. That is why, if confirmed, I am confident that I can lead VBA in delivering better service to Veterans.

In the Air Force, I led one of the largest mission and culture change efforts since the inception of that Department. This work included leadership and oversight of four divisions covering strategic planning, mission development, public and congressional affairs, and program and resource implementation. The effort affected more than 140 new Air Force units and their associated missions, and shifted billions of dollars toward new capabilities across the Air Force portfolio. The initiative also involved new organizational models for a worldwide 500,000 person organization including Active Duty, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve units and personnel to create a common Air Force policy, mission, and culture. This significant transformation directly impacted more than 50,000 members of the Air Force, provided new capabilities for the joint war fighter and redesigned the Air Force future force structure plan.

I also bring experience in the private sector in two areas that directly relate to VBA's core mission. The first area is human resources operations from recruitment to retirement—building and retaining a quality workforce. The second area is customer relationship management to include call center practices, customer relationship management system implementation and other 21st century information technology systems that provide transparency, increase accountability and speed the delivery of these services to customers.

It is my firm belief that it is an organization's employees who drive the real success that occurs in vital programs. I am committed, if confirmed, to making the VBA workforce successful, creating an environment that engages them and develops them to their full potential.

If confirmed as Under Secretary for Benefits, I am committed to working with this Committee, the Congress more broadly, the Veterans Service Organizations, other stakeholders and all of the wonderful employees at VBA to ensure VBA provides timely and quality benefits and services to America's heroes. Should I be confirmed, I will serve with passion and conviction as an advocate on behalf of all of America's Veterans.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

RESPONSE TO PREHEARING QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. PATTY MURRAY TO BRIG. GEN. ALLISON HICKEY TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Question 1. Why do you seek this position?

Response. I still remember the day in November 2009 when I heard Secretary Shinseki's inspiring remarks to thousands of military leaders from across our country about his vision for a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that is people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking. I heard his call to action to find an integrated approach of well-trained people, efficient and effective processes and proven new technologies all to deliver benefits and care for a changing population of Veterans who bring increasingly complex needs to the VA. He spoke with a compassion, conviction and confidence that ignited my desire to again serve my country and shaped my journey to seek this position. I have successfully led major transformation efforts in complex environments during my career and I look forward, if confirmed, to the

opportunity to apply that experience in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). I have recent Program Management experience with 21st Century IT systems that are used by well-trained employees to exercise streamlined and documented processes to deliver high performing results. I come from a family where service to others is part of our DNA. Most importantly, I feel called to advocate for all Veterans and their families who sacrifice so much for a safe and secure world. Each of these issues and more compel me to seek this position.

Question 2. What do you believe are the most important problems and challenges currently confronting VBA? Which of these problems and challenges will you focus on and how do you intend to address them?

Response. I strongly support the priorities that Secretary Shinseki has established as articulated in the Department of Veterans Affairs Strategic Plan Refresh FY 2011–2015 and agree with the focus it outlines for VBA and all of VA to “transform the Department to meet the emerging challenges of the 21st century, so we may continue to repay the debt of honor owed to the men and women, and their families, who have “borne the battle.”” If confirmed, the four strategic goals and integrated objectives will drive my focus to work across VA organizational lines to improve the quality and accessibility of benefits for Veterans and their families and survivors, as well as increase their satisfaction with education, training, and other benefits and services. As a person with extensive background in strategic planning, the Secretary’s approach for tackling these opportunities resonates with me. It is clear to me that the number one issue facing VBA is the continuing challenges associated with the claims backlog. I understand that the claims have grown in both numbers and complexity, which drives workload and workforce training issues. My previous experience in government and private sector suggests that a challenge with this amount of complexity can only be solved with improvements to the business processes and integration of appropriate technology that allows an organization to fundamentally transform the way the work is done and improve the results. Therefore, I believe that if confirmed, I would focus on the people, processes and technology that will provide VBA the methods to achieve the Secretary’s goals of eliminating the disability claims backlog by 2015 and ensuring no Veteran has to wait more than 125 days for a high quality decision with a 98% accuracy rate. I will also focus on preparing the workforce for these changes through a focus on training, communication and preparation for the various new transformational business processes that will become central to their daily operations.

Question 3. What is your management style? Are you a “hands-on” manager? Do you rely on significant delegation? Do you seek consensus with those on your management team before making a decision or do you generally gather relevant information and input, and then make a decision?

Response. I am a highly collaborative leader who seeks input from both internal and external stakeholders to the maximum extent possible. My experience tells me that when you bring all stakeholders into the process early, you avoid missteps and build consensus around the approach to an issue. I am careful to keep the bias for action on the decision, so lengthy processes do not stall the need for timely decisions in order to achieve actions that drive results. I also gather reliable data as one element of my decision process or the group’s decision process and watch for trends in the data to inform decisions or adjustments to the direction.

I approach most aspects of my leadership from a “balanced” approach. I seek solutions that are good for the mission, considerate of the people that need to deliver on that mission, and always focused on the customer—in this case, if confirmed, the Veterans, their families and survivors. I balance my approach to “hands on” involvement and delegation in the same way. When the situation requires little intervention because the organization is delivering customer excellence, then I tend to stay abreast of the issues but delegate more to the high performing leader. When the situation requires more of my engagement because the organization is challenged to deliver, then I first ask myself if the barriers to performance are created by something I or the leader on the team controls. Does the workforce have the resources, tools, guidance, or policy they need to do the job? Regardless of the circumstance, I am always willing to “roll up my sleeves” and assist further until the performance is achieved.

As a leader I believe that information is a vital resource to achieve operational excellence. I believe this information needs to be in the hands of those who require it to effectively lead others or execute on their job/task. I am a leader who believes in the model of “servant leadership” where taking care of those who do the work on a daily basis translates into better performance and higher levels of client satisfaction.

Question 4. Describe how you intend to work with the Secretary and two other Under Secretaries. Please also describe how you will work with others in the Agency who work directly impacts VBA (e.g. policy and planning).

Response. I hold the utmost respect for Secretary Shinseki, Deputy Secretary Gould, Under Secretary Petzel, Acting Under Secretary Muro and Chief of Staff Gingrich. If confirmed, I will work closely with each of them to raise issues, challenges, and offer assistance in solving problems to better serve Veterans. I am excited for the opportunity to work with this leadership team, to collaborate and coordinate across the department to solve cross-cutting challenges from a One-VA perspective, with an understanding of the interdependence of the different Administrations, Staff Offices and Organizations within VA. In particular, if confirmed, I would closely collaborate with Assistant Secretaries Baker and Henze, whose offices of Information and Technology and Policy and Planning are key to the success of VBA in terms of our leveraging new technology and our coordination with the Department of Defense.

Question 5. In your view, how long should a veteran have to wait to have his or her initial claim for compensation adjudicated?

Response. I am aware that Secretary Shinseki has set goals in this area and look forward to working with him, if confirmed, to ensure that by 2015, no Veteran has to wait more than 125 days for a decision with a 98% accuracy level. If confirmed, I would enter the Under Secretary post with the understanding that we will work tirelessly to achieve this goal. Veterans deserve a system responsive to their needs and ready to deliver the benefits they have earned through their military service in the fastest manner with a strong commitment to accuracy. It serves no one to achieve a fast decision if it is not our best work. If confirmed, I am committed to furthering the important work underway toward new paperless processing systems along with business practices that will provide our hardworking VBA workforce the 21st Century tools they need to serve America's Veterans. I am interested to learn more about new rules-based tools and calculators VBA is developing to help ensure accuracy while improving on speed.

Question 6. How do you plan to work with the veterans service organizations? Do you anticipate meeting with the VSO representatives on a regular basis?

Response. If confirmed, I plan to work both closely and often with the Veterans Service Organizations. If confirmed, I anticipate building on the existing substantial efforts VBA has taken to involve these knowledgeable and highly experienced organizations early in developing initiatives to improve the disability claims process and other areas so as to get their candid feedback and recommendations. I look forward to building relationships with them and together focusing on a shared passion for Veterans, their families and survivors.

Question 7. Committee staff access to career professionals at VBA is critically important as they conduct oversight of the Agency on behalf of members. In the past, VBA staffs from all business lines have been made available for briefings, questions, and related activities. Committee staff view these open channels of communication as vital. Do you intend to allow Committee staff the same level of access to VBA career employees?

Response. I agree that open communication with Committee staff is vital to the oversight mission of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and I fully support the continued access to VBA leadership and staff.

Question 8. Accurate forecasting of usage of veterans benefits is essential in planning for resources to administer those benefits. What do you see as the Under Secretary's role in forecasting the need for additional staffing resources so that Congress can appropriate those resources in a timely manner?

Response. As in any large enterprise, I believe the role of the leader is to ensure the organization has the data, information, and the analytical capability to make high quality forecasts that have the confidence of those who appropriate the resources. The Under Secretary, working in coordination with the Office of the Secretary, must timely convey accurate forecasts and resource requirements to Congress. If confirmed, I look forward to assessing VBA's capabilities in this area and ensuring we fill whatever gaps may exist.

Question 9. VBA has come under fire for the lack of timeliness of its claims processing. While VBA has made progress in improving timeliness and accuracy of disability claims processing, further improvement is needed. VBA turned its attention to decreasing the amount of time it takes to process a claim, but that improvement seems to be at the cost of a decrease in the quality of its decisionmaking. Do you have any views on how a more balanced approach can be reached?

Response. I have an extensive background in quality management principles and processes and am a strong proponent of training as one key element to improve re-

sults. It is my belief that there is no inherent conflict between speed and quality if employees are supported in obtaining the necessary skills through effective training programs and decision-support tools. Speed and quality will go hand-in-hand if we ensure employees receive the right training and tools, combined with efficient business processes and systems that incorporate rules-based technologies. I also believe that the ongoing work on the Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs) will improve the “data in” portion of the process. If confirmed, I will work to ensure that the training, tools, and systems needed to provide quality and timely decisions are available to VBA’s claims adjudicators.

Question 10. Many in the newest generation of veterans are technologically savvy. Veterans can submit claims for compensation over the Internet. What role do you envision for VA in improving the use of technology for the processing of initial applications for compensation and to aid in the timeliness and accuracy of claims adjudication?

Response. Veterans, especially the younger generation, expect to have self-service options available to apply for benefits and services and to interact with VA on the status of their claims—at a place and time of their choosing. Since I have done considerable work in the area of customer relationship management, I am most eager to learn more about the ongoing development efforts of the Veterans Relationship Management (VRM) initiative and VA’s plans to integrate VRM with the new paperless processing system. In my view, from outside the organization, it seems important for VA to optimize client interactions and leverage data and information sharing between VRM and the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), as well as with the joint VA/DOD Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) initiative. I believe integration of today’s technologies and communications channels in the claims process will drive major improvements in both timeliness and accuracy when combined with streamlined business processes, effective training, and appropriate job aids.

Question 11. For some medical conditions that occur after service, the scientific information needed to connect the medical condition and the circumstances of service may be incomplete. When information is incomplete, Congress or the Secretary of Veterans Affairs has authority to presume disabilities and diseases as service-connected for purposes of compensation. If confirmed as Under Secretary, what would be your approach for recommending whether a presumption is warranted?

Response. If confirmed as Under Secretary, my approach would be to follow the legal requirements established in law to guide any recommendations made to the Secretary. If confirmed, providing timely compensation and care for our Veterans will always be my top priority and I look forward to learning more about the presumptive disability authorities under the law.

Question 12. VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program is one of the smallest, yet most important, programs within the Department. It is the linchpin for helping veterans who incur service-connected disabilities achieve a fulfilling and gainful future. I am deeply committed to making sure that this program lives up to its full potential, especially when individuals who have sustained serious injuries in combat are concerned. What are your thoughts on the role that vocational rehabilitation plays in terms of the total rehabilitation of an individual recovering from severe combat-related injuries?

Response. I recently had the opportunity to briefly meet with Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) leadership to hear about this vital employment program for Veterans with disabilities and employment handicaps. As you are aware, VR&E’s primary mission is to assist Veterans prepare for, obtain, and sustain suitable employment. In my opinion, every rehabilitation plan must maximize the Veteran’s current skills and interests, translating their military experience to the demands of the civilian labor market to achieve suitable employment in a career field. If confirmed, I will ensure that VBA maintains its focus on addressing the rehabilitation needs and expectations of Veterans with severe combat-related injuries. These Veterans have so much to offer our country; we must do all we can to help them succeed.

Question 13. Through VA’s vocational rehabilitation program, VA assumes certain responsibilities for the provision of employment assistance to veterans who complete a plan of vocational rehabilitation. This assistance can take a variety of forms. I am concerned that VA cooperate and coordinate with the Department of Labor’s Veterans’ Employment and Training Service so that duplication of effort can be minimized. If confirmed as Under Secretary, what will you do to involve both DOL and DOD in efforts to ensure that employment-related issues are addressed seamlessly and without duplication of effort?

Response. If confirmed as Under Secretary, I will work to enhance the relationships VBA currently has with DOL and DOD. It is my hope that my previous career in DOD will allow me to leverage those contacts and relationships to strengthen coordination. I understand that VR&E and DOL work together in a collaborative and cooperative partnership to assist Veterans with disabilities secure suitable employment. I will also ensure that VR&E continues to work closely with DOL on employment-related issues and engage in joint discussions with DOD, DOL, and other key external stakeholders to ensure that the transition of Servicemembers into civilian employment is seamless and non-duplicative.

Question 14. Eligibility for VA's vocational rehabilitation program requires both a service-connected disability and a clearly defined employment handicap, as defined by an impairment of a veteran's ability to prepare for, obtain, or retain employment consistent with his or her abilities, aptitudes, and interests. Concerns have been expressed that in practice, VR&E encourages veterans to take lower paying employment vice career-oriented professions. What do you believe can be done to address these concerns?

Response. Now, more than ever, the employment needs of Veterans must remain among VBA's top priorities. I understand that many separating Servicemembers and Veterans want and need immediate employment to ease their transition into civilian life. As such, VBA's focus must be to provide services that give Veterans the option to accept transitional employment while also planning for their careers, thus ensuring long-term stability and upward mobility in line with each individual's skills and interests.

If confirmed, I will make certain that VBA continues to seek new and better ways to assist disabled Veterans who are striving to achieve employment stability and upward mobility.

Question 15. Under current policies, there is a protracted period of evaluation and multiple reviews of decisions concerning seriously disabled veterans seeking independent living services. If confirmed, will you look into what steps might be taken to shorten the evaluation period and reduce the layers of the review?

Response. Assisting Veterans with the most severe disabilities is of the utmost importance. If confirmed, I will discuss with VR&E leadership additional options to shorten the evaluation period, streamline processes, and reduce the layers of the review for Veterans seeking independent living services.

Question 16. Under Secretary Shinseki's leadership, VA has gone to great lengths to develop and implement a fully electronic claims process for GI Bill, and compensation and pension claims. These new technologies still require more development and wider adoption. How would you use your leadership to ensure the promise of each new technology is fully realized?

Response. My career has provided me with significant background in program management and ensuring projects deliver the desired tools on time and with proper integration and adoption within an organization. If confirmed, I would seek enhancements that put Veterans in control where possible, with easy access to information about their claims and the capability to communicate with VA offices and receive outreach messages through a variety of technologies that match their preferences. VA must ensure that the promises of automation are executed with a common Veteran-centric focus, and that technological innovations are developed to provide maximum return to our Veterans. I understand VBA already has a rigorous schedule of regular meetings with Veterans Service Organizations at multiple levels to solicit their input on process improvements and transformational initiatives such as VBMS. This regular interaction and sharing of ideas would remain a high priority. To realize the promise of paperless processing and other technology enhancements, it is critically important to consult with industry experts and work closely with the Department's Office of Information and Technology. If confirmed, I would also rely on dialog with and input from this Committee as VA refines its strategic direction along the road to success.

Question 17. VBA has had some success in the past with improving the efficiency of claims processing by consolidating certain services into fewer offices. What are your views on the pros and cons of such consolidation?

Response. Generally I believe that opportunities exist to improve service delivery and achieve greater efficiencies through specialization and consolidation of processing activities. Consolidation can also facilitate the delivery of standardized training and quality assurance programs, leading to improved quality and decision consistency. With that said, if confirmed, I would want to look at any consolidation plans on a case-by-case basis and understand the proposed benefits and potential downsides to any changes.

Question 18. What changes, if any, do you anticipate making to the way quality of claims processing is measured at VBA?

Response. In general, I am a proponent of building quality into a process upfront as opposed to assessing quality at the end of the development process. I am also a proponent of measuring quality throughout a process—especially at critical “hand-off” stages. While I am not in a position at this time to assess the adequacy of the methods currently used by VBA to measure quality, I am aware that in the compensation and pension area, VBA has a number of methods of assessing quality including the Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR) program, consistency assessments, site surveys and special reviews. If confirmed, I will look at each in depth to determine what, if any, changes are appropriate.

Question 19. Given your background, what areas do you see in which VA and DOD can do a better job with collaboration and cooperation so that more timely access to benefits can be provided?

Response. I see great opportunity in the efforts announced by President Obama, Secretary Shinseki, and Secretary Gates to create a Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record of medical and administrative information accessible by both Departments which would significantly assist in the disability evaluation process. I am excited by the opportunity to further enhance collaboration through initiatives such as the Integrated Disability Evaluation System and the eBenefits portal—both designed to improve information sharing to the benefit of Veterans, family members and survivors. If confirmed, I look forward to using my background serving in the DOD, including significant time working with the National Guard and Reserve, to further enhance our people-centric collaboration and cooperation with DOD.

Question 20. I am interested in hearing about your views on the IOM’s report for the VDBC on Evaluation of the Presumptive Disability Decision-Making Process for Veterans. That IOM Committee recommended a new process for VA to follow in establishing presumptions. Can you please comment on your view of this new process?

Response. I have not read the report, but I understand that this is a very complex area. If confirmed, I will need to study this subject area further in order to understand more fully the recommendations of the IOM. If confirmed, I would also look forward to hearing the views of the Committee and Veterans Service Organizations on this important topic.

Question 21. With respect to presumptive disability decisionmaking, IOM also recommended a standard of “causal effect.” In some cases, servicemembers may have been subjected to multiple potential exposures of uncertain dosage. If causation is unclear, should evidence of increased incidence of certain disabilities be a basis for service-connection?

Response. Similar to the subject of Question 20, I have not read the report but understand that this is a very complex area and, if confirmed, I will need to study it further in order to understand more fully the recommendations of the IOM. If confirmed, I would look forward to hearing the views of the Committee and Veterans Service Organizations on this important topic.

Question 22. VA recently entered into a memorandum of understanding with Indian Health Service in order to enhance the services available to Native American and Alaska Native Veterans. Please describe how you believe VBA can fulfill its responsibilities under this arrangement.

Response. Although I have not had opportunity to review this agreement with Indian Health Services, it is my understanding that through this partnership VBA will increase access to services and benefits for Native American and Alaska Native Veterans. If confirmed, I would make it a priority to ensure VBA is fulfilling its responsibilities under this agreement and developing and implementing innovative and effective outreach strategies to ensure this population of Veterans are aware of, and can easily access, their VA benefits.

Question 23. In recent months, contracting out of medical disability examinations has increased through the implementation of the Integrated Disability Evaluation System program. Under your leadership, would you continue to rely on contracting out for these examinations to supplement those that VHA provides?

Response. If confirmed, I would look at the entire examination process and the various methods and options that are available to ensure medical disability exams are performed in a complete and timely manner. I would not want to state an opinion until I have been briefed and fully understand all the implications of using or not using contracting to supplement disability examinations. The Veterans Health Administration would be a crucial partner for any work in this area.

Question 24. Do you foresee a time when contracting out of disability medical examinations will be the norm—and that VHA will not be expected to provide disability medical examinations?

Response It is my understanding that contract physicians currently perform 20 percent of all C&P examinations. VHA completes the remaining 80 percent. Given this information, I would not foresee contracting vehicles being used as the sole source for completing disability examinations.

Question 25. VBA is in the process of developing the Veterans Relationship Management (VRM) initiative. What is your vision for the development of the next wave of VRM improvements?

Response. From my understanding, the VRM's focus is to transform the Veteran's experience with VA through greater client-centric operations. I have considerable experience in assisting clients in implementing customer relationship management (CRM) systems and software and, if confirmed, look forward to applying that background to this effort. I was pleased to learn that the next wave of VRM improvements focuses on the iterative deployment of CRM tools. Through state-of-the-art CRM, VA will begin maintaining a shared record of contacts between VA organizations and Veteran-clients, which will be critical to achieving a better understanding of their needs and improving VA's ability to provide personalized experiences and superior customer service. If confirmed, I look forward to the opportunity to provide leadership and direction on this major initiative of extreme importance to Veterans and their families.

Question 26. VA recently created a new Benefits Assistance Service (BAS) to ensure customer satisfaction, among other things. What role do you envision for the BAS during your term?

Response. From my understanding, the BAS's goal is to serve as the key VBA organizational component that directs, coordinates, and oversees an expanded and enhanced program of outreach and client services that fulfill VA's advocacy responsibilities to Veterans and their families. If confirmed, I will work to ensure the BAS continually assesses and improves awareness, access, and service delivery so that VA is building proactive relationships with Veterans, and Veterans are provided accurate, professional, and compassionate services every time they contact VA for assistance. I believe this major customer relationship management initiative to provide multiple access channels and self-service options for Veterans and up-to-date tools for employees is vital to achieving the client-centered and personalized services Veterans expect and deserve to receive from VA.

Question 27. Given the fairly recent media controversy over VA's insurance programs, do you envision any further changes to the programs to ensure transparency and confidence in the programs?

Response. Overall I am aware this program has sustained over time a very high level of customer satisfaction. As I understand it, changes have been made to ensure that beneficiaries have a clear choice in how they want to receive their insurance payments. If confirmed, I will constantly look for new ways to further enhance all programs under VBA's jurisdiction.

Question 28. Committee oversight too often finds veterans who are unaware of the benefits available to them. What type of outreach do you have planned to ensure that Servicemembers and veterans are aware that they can utilize their benefits?

Response. I know the topic of outreach is one that is very important to this Committee and to VA. If confirmed, ensuring Veterans are aware of and know how to access their benefits will be a priority for me. From my understanding of current efforts there are significant outreach activities underway in VBA and across VA. The eBenefits portal is but one part of this effort, which also includes the use of social media tools. Part of outreach work entails understanding how Servicemembers, Veterans and their dependents access VA information, and then developing a multi-channel way to connect to them based upon their personal preference. In my view, VBA's outreach efforts must proactively engage Servicemembers and their families (Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve) through early communication of benefits beginning at accession and throughout their military careers, with effective communications continuing after separation from service. Outreach programs must also be redesigned to more effectively engage Veterans and their families in their communities. If confirmed, I will work to strengthen partnerships with Veterans Service Organizations, Federal agencies, and other state and local organizations to ensure VBA's outreach programs provide the right information and assistance at the right time. It is also crucial to ensure coordination between any VBA outreach program and other similar efforts across the Department.

Question 29. Employee training is one of the most crucial efforts VA can put forth to break the back of the claims backlog by 2015. To that end, do you envision any changes to the current status or format of employee training?

Response. As a strong proponent of training, I share the emphasis the Committee has placed on employee training as a tool to break the back of the claims backlog by 2015. Highly skilled and well-practiced claims processors can deliver benefits to Veterans accurately, efficiently, and quickly when also provided with the right tools. I believe improvements can be achieved through standardization of job-skill training at the national level for both entry-level employees and experienced employees, and the development of formal training products that can be delivered to employees at their locations, and when they need the training.

For critical positions that do not currently have nationally standardized curricula, if confirmed I would focus on new development to provide consistent training to support consistent performance. For critical positions that already have nationally standardized curricula, my focus would be on increased emphasis on evaluation and accountability for completion and to support timely delivery of training that is relevant to national quality issues.

Question 30. Women veterans are the fastest-growing segment of the veterans' population. And because there are no frontlines on the battlefield in the current wars, we know that women are engaging in combat with the enemy. Unfortunately, because of the DOD policy prohibiting women from serving "in combat," this reality is not well understood here at home, including by some in VA. This knowledge gap obviously impacts the ability of women veterans to receive disability benefits from the VA. What will you do to ensure that all VBA staff are aware that women are serving in combat and that they must have equal access to the benefits that they have earned?

Response. As a Veteran and a woman, ensuring women Veterans are receiving quality benefits, care and customer service is a top priority for me. If confirmed, I will work to ensure that women Veterans' unique needs and issues are understood by our employees and remain at the forefront. Continuous and effective training is key to ensuring that awareness. When compensation benefits involve physical injury incurred by women in a combat theater, there should be no inequality in access to benefits because of the fact the physical injury will be recorded in military treatment records. However, I do know from my own military experience that when disability benefits involve mental health issues incurred by women based on stressful events in a combat theater, documentary evidence of the stressful event would often be difficult to obtain. For that reason, I am very supportive of Secretary Shinseki's regulation change related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that makes it easier for Veterans, including women Veterans, to obtain PTSD benefits when the stressor is based on a fear of hostile military or terrorist activity. This updated approach to PTSD compensation acknowledges that women are subjected to the same dangers and stresses as their male counterparts. If confirmed, I will ensure that comprehensive training programs exist for both new and experienced decision-makers that appropriately address women's issues. I will also look to VA's Center for Women Veterans, the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, and the Veterans Health Administration to continue to assist VBA in meeting the needs of women Veterans.

Question 31. One of the biggest challenges that VA has faced over the course of the last two years is the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which was signed into law on June 30, 2008, and became fully effective on August 1, 2009. Although at times, implementation has posed daunting problems with the timely delivery of benefits, VA has made progress and is moving forward with a long-term solution for processing and paying benefits to veterans and other students. Have you been able to make an assessment as to whether VA will be able to meet future timelines for improvements in this area and what will you do to make sure that it does?

Response. I am aware that VA has established a timeframe for implementing technology that will expedite the delivery of education benefits. After initial challenges in implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, I understand that VA has made significant progress in administering this program and using automation tools to enhance delivery of benefits. I am also aware of recent legislative changes that impact the way VA currently administers the Post-9/11 GI Bill and other benefits. If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about VBA's implementation timeline for the changes required by the new legislation as well as the overall efforts to develop and roll out additional technology tools for processing of educational claims and providing educational benefits.

Question 32. Some of the underlying causes of homelessness among veterans are inadequate income, lack of affordable housing, and lack of accessible and affordable

health care. What role, if any, do you believe VBA should play in preventing and ultimately ending homelessness among veterans?

Response. If confirmed, I am committed to supporting achievement of the Secretary's goal to eliminate Veteran homelessness within four years. Having served in a faith-based community effort to assist the homeless of Washington, DC, this effort is one of the initiatives that drew me to pursue the position of Under Secretary. I have had personal conversations with homeless veterans and am proud to see VA tackle this issue. I know that VBA is a key partner in achieving the Secretary's goal. I understand there are Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinators at each VA Regional Office to help ensure homeless Veterans and their claims are properly identified and expeditiously processed. I have been informed that these Outreach Coordinators also make referrals that incorporate VHA and other Federal and community partners into the Veteran's life.

I also understand that VBA's home loan guaranty program plays a central role in preventing homelessness by helping Veterans retain their homes in periods of financial difficulty. If confirmed, I will work in a collaborative manner with VHA and other partners inside and outside VA to promote efforts that target this vulnerable population of Veterans and provide assistance with reintegrating them into the community.

Question 33. With the increase in the number of women veterans, how do you, if confirmed as Under Secretary, intend to better utilize the Women Veteran Coordinators at the VA Regional Offices?

Response. As a Veteran and a woman, ensuring women Veterans are receiving quality benefits, care and customer service is a top priority for me. If confirmed, I would work to ensure that all VBA Women Veteran Coordinators proactively reach out to women Veterans within their community. VBA coordinators must receive appropriate training and be equipped with toolkits to advise and counsel women Veterans regarding VA benefits and services. As mentioned earlier, if confirmed, I would also work closely with the VHA's Women's Health Program, VA's Center for Women Veterans, and the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans.

Question 34. At the present time, military recruiters are actively recruiting Servicemembers from countries in the Pacific Islands, such as the Federated States of Micronesia. Some veterans' benefits, such as vocational rehabilitation services, VA home loans, and health care are not normally provided outside of the United States. In your view, what obligation does the government have to provide non-citizen disabled veterans benefits and services needed to compensate for and overcome the disabilities which they incurred after being recruited into United States military service?

Response. I have been informed that the primary factor for determining eligibility to VA benefits is "Veteran status," which is based on active military, naval or air service. I understand that non-citizen disabled Veterans are eligible for many of the same benefits as Veterans who are U.S. citizens and reside outside of the United States. If confirmed as Under Secretary for Benefits, I will ask for a briefing on this topic to understand what limits may exist for the provision of benefits outside of the United States.

Question 35. The Committee has conducted extensive oversight of the Integrated Disability Evaluation System. It is clear to me that challenges remain in implementing the program worldwide—which is the stated objective of both VA and DOD. Please describe how you will participate in decisions made with regard to the program given that responsibility for the program lies with Policy & Planning?

Response. The Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) effort is a joint VA and DOD initiative. If confirmed, I look forward to working with external and internal partners to continue its progress. It is my understanding that the Department's VADOD Collaboration Service, located within the Office of Policy and Planning, serves as the coordinating office to ensure that the various VBA and VHA elements of the organization are aligned in the IDES effort while the actual execution of the IDES rollout remains with the Administrations. If confirmed, I see my responsibilities in the areas of the Military Services Coordinators and the rating activities in the IDES. I understand that IDES is on track to be rolled out to all Continental United States, Hawaii, and Alaska locations prior to October 2011. If confirmed, I will participate in decisions by having my staff provide me with complete analyses to include manpower and resource requirements and impact on existing programs before I make recommendations on the IDES program. It is my understanding that, if confirmed, I will sit on the Senior Oversight Committee and, in that position, will have the opportunity to become actively engaged in any decisions that may impact VBA.

Question 36. What role, if any, do you believe VA has in ensuring that veterans and others using educational assistance benefits receive quality education and training experiences?

Response. I share the Secretary's view that VA plays an important role in ensuring all schools are held to the same quality standards, and that Veterans have adequate information to make informed decisions about how to use their VA education benefits to obtain a quality education. I am also aware that VA has procedures in place for oversight of participating schools and educational programs. If confirmed, I look forward to learning more details about maximizing VA's strategies for ensuring that Veterans receive a quality education in exchange for their earned VA benefits.

Question 37. I have heard from constituents that very little information is available to veterans on the Native American Veteran Direct Loan program. What actions do you intend to take in the way of program outreach, local partnerships, and/or other mechanisms to ensure that eligible veterans are aware that they may participate in this program?

Response. I understand that information regarding the Native American Veteran Direct Loan (NADL) program is currently available online, provided to separating Servicemembers during Transition Assistance Program briefings, and through outreach to local tribes at conferences sponsored by the Native American Indian Housing Council and the National Congress of American Indians. If confirmed, I will continue to work with State Veterans' Affairs Departments and inter-tribal groups such as the United Southern and Eastern Tribes to ensure information is distributed to all appropriate audiences.

Question 38. Are you concerned with any portion of the Administration's budget request for FY 2012 as it pertains to VBA?

Response. I fully support the President's Budget. I believe it fully supports the VBA's highest priority; eliminating the disability claims backlog and ensuring no Veteran has to wait more than 125 days for a high-quality decision.

Question 39. The Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans recommended that VA increase and fund more full-time Minority Veterans Program Coordinator (MVPC) positions, as the average VBA MVPC spends only twenty-four hours per quarter targeting outreach activities due to the conflict between the ancillary nature of this duty and production quotas. Do you think that the MVPC should be a full-time responsibility? How will you measure and benchmark the impact of VBA's outreach efforts to the minority veterans' community to ensure that these efforts are effective?

Response. I believe that VBA's Minority Veterans Program must be appropriately staffed to provide effective outreach and assistance to minority Veterans. If confirmed, I will work collaboratively with the Center for Minority Veterans to identify ways to measure and ensure the success of our outreach efforts.

[The Committee questionnaire for Presidential nominees follows:]

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEES

PART 1: ALL OF THE INFORMATION IN THIS PART WILL BE MADE PUBLIC

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Home: 43254 Watershed Ct., Ashburn, VA 20147-5314
Work: Accenture, 11951 Freedom Drive, Reston VA 20190-5651
3. Position to which nominated. Under Secretary for Benefits - Veterans Benefits Administration -
Department of Veterans Affairs
4. Date of nomination. January 5, 2011
5. Date of birth (Month, day, year). June 16, 1958
6. Place of birth (City, state, country). Paris, France - Born to military parents stationed abroad.
7. Marital status. Married
8. Full name of spouse (including maiden name). Robert Alan Hickey
9. Names and ages of children. Tyler Adam Hickey - 22; Chelsea Aleena Hickey - 21; Michael Adam Hickey - 15
10. Education (List all post-secondary institutions of higher learning, dates attended, degree(s) received, and date degree(s) granted).

U.S Air Force Academy (first class to admit women)	1976-1980	B.S., 1980
Squadron Officer School Maxwell Air Force Base	1984	Certificate, 1984
Air Command and Staff College (by correspondence)	1994-1995	Certificate, 1995
Air War College (by correspondence)	1997-1998	Certificate, 1998
National War College	1998-1999	M.S., 1999
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Seminar 21 fellowship, conducted in residence at various sites in the National Capital Region)	2001-2002	Certificate, 2002

Program Management Institute (e-Learning Method)	2009-2010	Program Management Professional Certification, 2010
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11. Honors and Awards (List all scholarships, fellowships, honorary degrees, honorary society memberships, and any other special recognition for outstanding service or achievement).

None outside of Military Service.

12. Memberships (List all memberships and offices held in professional, fraternal, business, scholarly, civic, charitable, and other organizations for the last ten years. Include the dates of any such memberships or offices).

- United States Air Force Academy Association of Graduates, Member, Board of Directors, (Jan 2008 – Aug 2009)
- The United States Air Force Academy Falcon Foundation, Trustee, (2009 – Present)
- National Academies of Science - Standing Committee for Technology Insight-Gauge, Evaluate and Review (TIGER), Member, (2009 – Present)
- AcademyWomen, Member, Board of Advisors, (2007 – Present)
- Society for Human Resource Professionals, Member, (2009 -Present)
- Program Management Institute, Program Management Professional/Member, (2010 - Present)
- American Legion, Member, (2006 – 2007)
- Crossroads United Methodist Church, Chair, Board of Directors (2007-2008)

13. Employment record (List all employment (except military service) since your twenty-first birthday, including the title, description of job, name of employer, location of work, and inclusive dates of employment).

- **Program Manager, Human Capital Management and Director, Office of Diversity Management & Equal Employment Opportunity, Accenture National Security Services on contract to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), Reston, VA and Bethesda, MD: June 08 – Present**

Provide leadership and oversight to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency Human Capital Management Contract to include overall program management, requirement management, financial management and studies and analysis for the following Human Capital areas:

- Strategic Workforce Planning and Manpower Management
- Benefits and Retirement Services (Including Leave Bank Transfer Program)
- Workers Compensation Claims
- Work-Life (Wellness) Program
- PeopleSoft Human Resource Information System Personnel Data and Official Personnel File Maintenance
- Data Steward – Human Resource Analytics and Diversity Analytics – Employee Climate Surveys
- Recruitment Business Operations, Marketing and Advertising and Diversity Recruiting Studies
- Employee Entry on Duty
- Process Improvement/Lean Six Sigma
- Special Studies and Analysis
- Lead a team of 50+ contract employees in three geographically distributed locations under a complex contract structure that includes Cost plus Fixed Fee, Fixed Fee (with Acceptable Quality Levels) and Level of Effort with incentive awards for performance to criteria. Insured contract

delivery is conducted on time and on cost. Sustained Client awarded Program Management scores in the Excellent category.

- Served as Accenture Leadership Ambassador
- Senior Manager and Process Improvement Team Lead, Accenture on contract to Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Open Source Center, Accenture Office – Boston, VA: Feb 08 – Sept 08
 - Provided leadership and oversight to the DNI Open Source Center Contract for the areas of: Process improvement and reengineering, Lean Six Sigma; marketing and brand strategy; customer survey development, distribution and analysis; user experience or web diagnostics; enterprise business requirements and data governance for a new Customer Relationship Management System (CRMS); including responsibility for project management, requirement management, financial management and studies and analysis.
 - Accenture Additional Duty: Designed and developed Accenture Internal Defense Industry computer based training for all Accenture employees understanding of Defense processes, terminology and insight.
- Management analyst (technician), GS-11, 111th Tactical Air Support Group, Pennsylvania Air National Guard, Willow Grove Air Reserve Station, PA: Aug 90 - June 92
 - Served as day to day supervisor for Tactical Fighter Group Medical Clinic Superintendent, Security Forces Superintendent, Bio-Environmental Specialist and Squadron Mobility Program.
 - Developed Family Program from inception and served as the Officer in Charge during preparations and mobilizations for Desert Shield/Desert Storm. Served as the Unit Exercise Evaluation Team Chief and Survival and Recovery Center Commander. Developed and conducted five major Operational Readiness Exercises to test unit-wide readiness for war time mission.

14. Military Service (List all military service (including reserve components and National Guard or Air National Guard) with inclusive dates of service, rank, titles, permanent duty stations and units of assignment, descriptions of assignments, any military medals, and type of discharge).

- Director, Future Total Force/Total Force Integration (A8F), Headquarters United States Air Force, Pentagon, Washington, DC: March 05 – Nov 07
 - Provided leadership and oversight for four divisions in the areas of Air Force strategic planning, mission development, public and congressional affairs, and program and resource implementation for over 140 new units worth \$4 billion across nearly every state and territory and their associated missions, equipment, funding, training, infrastructure, processes, policies, legislation, instructions and doctrine. Responsible for the stand-up and day-to-day staff operations, personnel actions and policies of the directorate which included military, civilian personnel and contractors.
 - Led two year extensive Air Force strategic planning effort (Future Total Force/Total Force Integration) including focused study and analysis effort to identify, prioritize and implement a comprehensive shift in the business plan for this world-wide 500,000 person organization. Plan directly impacted more than 50,000 members of the Air Force, Air National Guard and the Air Force Reserve. Transformed the USAF Total Force projected future force roadmaps.
 - Regularly conducted thousands of Senior Executive stakeholder meetings, briefings and negotiations. Regularly conducted media interviews and Congressional visits.
 - Developed processes, procedures, governance, standards, and agreements to insure the sustainment and pioneering of new methodologies to guarantee idea implementation such as

transparent and collaborative information sharing systems to provide all stakeholders real-time common operating picture across the command.

- Led merger of over 60 different business units to create efficiencies to fund new acquisitions and missions while sustaining and transitioning critical human capital. Recommended, advocated and implemented solutions that prioritized the airman.
- **Assistant Deputy Director, Directorate of Strategic Planning, Headquarters United States Air Force (HAF/ASX), Pentagon, Washington, DC: March 04 – March 05**
 - Assisted the Director and provided direct leadership and oversight for five divisions with the responsibility for developing and implementing Future Concepts and Transformation; Long Range Plans; Strategy; Future Total Force; and the Quadrennial Defense Review. Responsible for the coordination of these areas with other services and allies including a formal liaison to the United Kingdom Royal Air Forces and Canadian Air Forces – as well as industry, academia and advanced research and technology labs.
 - Responsible for the Air Force's development of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Directed Transformation Flight Plans – which directed institutional change across all areas of organization, technology and concepts of operations with significant implications to Strategic Workforce Planning and the Air Force Human Capital Strategic Plan.
 - Led an Air Force-wide study on Force Development and Career Paths called "Leaders without Borders" which fundamentally changed the methods by which senior leadership opportunities increased for the Total Force including Active Duty, National Guard, Reserve, and Civilian Senior Executive Service.
 - Positioned the Air Force for the Quadrennial Defense Review through Air Force Vision Document called "Future Vectors" which became foundational document to drive all key Air Force decisions for the next 15-20 years.
- **Chief, Air Force Future Concepts and Transformation (HAF/ABXC), Headquarters United States Air Force, Pentagon, Washington, DC: March 03 – March 04**
 - Led a division responsible for developing and implementing USAF Long-range, strategic planning through coordination with other services, allies, industry, academia and advanced research and technology labs—captured, evaluated and synthesized innovative ideas on the forefront of advanced technology or new concepts and incorporated these concept studies into Air Force planning. Responsible for the development of investigative techniques using modeling, simulation and war-gaming to determine the most promising operational concepts and associated alternative force structure and manpower options. Responsible for the development, execution and assessment of the Air Force 2004 Future Capabilities Game and used the game for the first time as a senior officer development tool. Major contributor to the Officer of 2030 study and ongoing Strategic Workforce Planning efforts that aligned with the directed changes in vision and mission for the United States Air Force.
- **Chief, Strategic Initiatives Group, Office of the Chief, National Guard Bureau, Arlington, VA: Oct 02 – March 03**

- Provided direct unfiltered advice to the Chief and Director on planning and programming; homeland security/homeland defense; Global War On Terror (GWOT); Quadrennial Defense Review; Base Realignment And Closure (BRAC); Office of the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Studies; Transformation policies and initiatives and personnel policies and initiatives effecting an organization of 458,000 members of the Army and Air National Guard across 54 States and territories with an \$18 billion budget and over 2700 sites. Led the early efforts to establish policy for the State Joint Force Headquarters in every state and territory.
- **Director, Strategic Initiatives for the Director of the Air National Guard, National Guard Bureau, Arlington, VA: June 99 – Oct 02**
 - Led the Director of the Air National Guard's Strategic Initiatives Group, including the Air National Guard lead for all QDR inputs and numerous strategic studies and analysis. Led 7 major strategic studies and created the first ever Air National Guard Resource Guide – a comprehensive compilation of data to inform senior leaders and stakeholders about the Air National Guard. Led the highly successful "Year of" campaign including: Year of the Enlisted Force; Year of the Family; Year of Diversity; and Year of the Employer Support to the Guard and Reserve in which many improvements were made in each, resulting in overall positive changes to recruiting, readiness, mobilization sustainment, family and employer support, human capital strategies, processes and policies; resources; regulatory instruction and awards. Speech and testimony writer.
 - Brokered several strategic initiatives including the first-ever Air National Guard funded family readiness and support program at 92 installations across the nation in anticipation of what proved to be historically high volunteerism and deployment levels – especially in the wake of 9-11 and GWOT requirements.
 - Responsible for all Strategic Communications for the Director, Air National Guard
- **Student, National War College, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC: Aug 98 – June 99**
Masters of Science in National Security Strategy
- **Member, Air Force Chief of Staff National Defense Review Staff (QDR), Headquarters United States Air Force, Pentagon, Washington, DC: Oct 97 – Aug 98**
 - Member, Strategy Analyst, Total Force Subject Matter Expert, Force Structure analyst, and Organizational Design expert. Lead project officer on two of the most significant strategic structural changes to the United States Air Force: the Future Total Force Initiative and Air Force Expeditionary Operations Design.
- **Chief of Operations/Chief, Curriculum Development and Review/ Chief, Education and Training - Directorate for Productivity and Quality, National Guard Bureau, Washington, DC: June 93 – October 97**
 - Supervisor of 15 Staff and 200 Adjunct Instructors. Category 3 Unit Quality Award Examiner. Strategic Planning Expert and Advisor to Blue Ribbon Commission; Secretary of the Air Force Unit Quality Award (Baldrige Award Category 3 (Strategic Planning)); Architect of Air Force and

Air National Guard Strategic Planning Processes. Developed eight comprehensive, award-winning courses and instructed over 50,000 students (all ranks- Enlisted to General Officers) in a four year period. Facilitated over 100 senior leader strategic planning efforts.

- **Education and Training Officer and Long Range Planning Officer, Pennsylvania Air National Guard, State Headquarters, Fort Indiantown Gap, PA: June 92 - June 93**
 - Responsible for Long Range Planning efforts for Pennsylvania Air National Guard across all mission areas within the state. Specifically focused on Quality Management training to include leadership training; teams, tools and techniques for operational process improvement; measurement and analysis and strategic plan development, tracking and implementation. Also responsible for reporting state-wide training performance in readiness areas.
- **Management Analyst, Mission Support Squadron Executive Officer, Personnel Officer, Exercise Evaluation Team Chief and Survival Center Commander, 111th Tactical Fighter Group, Willow Grove Naval Air Station, PA: Aug 90 - June 92**
 - Responsible for all personnel actions associated with a 1500 person unit including training, personnel records, deployment readiness, security readiness, medical readiness, and family readiness. Also served as the Unit Survival and Recovery Center Commander and the Project Officer for the units Operational Readiness Inspection. Served as Unit Exercise Evaluation Team Chief. Served as Technician, daily supervision of Security Police, Medical Clinic, and Bio Environment office.
- **US Air Force Academy Liaison Officer, Pennsylvania Region, PA: Jan - Aug 1990**
 - Provided information about Air Force educational opportunities to high school counselors, administrators and prospective cadets in the Pennsylvania region. Explained Air Force Academy and Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps programs and admissions procedures to young men and women potentially qualified and interested in an Air Force career.
- **KC-10 Pilot, Awards and Decorations Monitor, Performance Report Monitor, Wing Staff Mission Scheduler, 32 Air Refueling Squadron, Barksdale Air Force Base, LA: Oct 86 - Jan 90**
 - Performed global operational air refueling/cargo missions in support of NATO and multiservice agencies. As wing scheduler integrated complex mission variables into challenging, highly efficient mission scenarios for the wing's two tactical KC-10 squadrons. Single point of contact for commitment and employment of all KC-10 resources to headquarters and short-notice joint Chiefs of Staff-directed global deployments. Managed a \$60 million annual flying budget and \$1.2 billion in aircraft assets as well as a 10,000 flying hour allocation and 2,200 sorties. Project Officer for 8th Air Force Memorial Family Recreation Center.
- **Air Staff Training officer, Air Staff Training Program (ASTRA), Directorate of Personnel, Civilian Personnel Analyst & Personnel Analysis Center, Headquarters United States Air Force, Pentagon, Washington, DC: Oct 85 - Sept 86**

- Highly competitive Air Force Officer Fellow Program: conducted studies and Analysis on Civilian End strength policies, laws, resources, pay and compensation modernization, competencies, and benefits. Member - Personnel Activities Panel; Defense Management Resource Board; Advocacy for Air Force Family Support Centers; Pilot Incentive Pay; and Survey Design, Development and Execution. Testimony Development.
- **KC135A Pilot, Aircraft Commander, Supervisor of Flying - 2nd BOMW, 905th Air Refueling Squadron, Grand Forks AFB, ND: Nov 81 - Oct 85**
 - As Aircraft Commander and Pilot, responsible for the safe in-flight operation of a multi-million dollar aircraft. Lead multiple KC-135 aircraft global refueling operations and formations. Maintained readiness of crew in support of the Single Integrated Operational Plan. Additionally served as Lieutenants Professional Development Program Flight Commander and Instructor, Self-Inspection Monitor, Historical Officer and Wing Supervisor of Flying, Awards and Decorations Monitor, and Performance Reports Monitor.
- **Student, Undergraduate Pilot Training, 14th Flying Training Wing, Columbus Air Force Base, MS: June 80 - June 81**
- **Cadet, United States Air Force Academy, CO: June 76 - May 80**

FLIGHT INFORMATION

Rating: Senior pilot

Flight hours: More than 1,500

Aircraft flown: T-37, T-38, KC-135A and KC-10A

MAJOR AWARDS AND DECORATIONS

Distinguished Service Medal

Legion of Merit

Meritorious Service Medal with oak leaf cluster

Air Force Commendation Medal with oak leaf cluster

Air Force Achievement Medal

Outstanding Unit Award with oak leaf cluster

Combat Readiness Medal with oak leaf cluster

National Defense Service Medal with bronze star

Air Force Longevity Award with three oak leaf clusters

Air Force Training Ribbon

OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

1981 Distinguished graduate, KC-135A initial co-pilot training

1984 Distinguished graduate, KC-135A Aircraft Commander School

1984 Wing Junior Officer of the Year, Air Division Nominee for 15AF Junior Officer of the Year

EFFECTIVE DATES OF PROMOTION

Second Lieutenant - May 28, 1980

First Lieutenant - May 28, 1982

Captain - May 28, 1984

Major - Jan 21, 1991
 Lieutenant Colonel - April 1, 1996
 Colonel - March 30, 2000
 Brigadier General - Nov 3, 2004

RETIRED EFFECTIVE: November 30, 2007 – Honorable Discharge

15. Government service record (List any advisory, consultative, honorary, or other part-time service or positions with Federal, State, or local governments other than those listed under Employment record, above).

None

16. Published writings and public statements (in last 10 years)

(a) List the titles, publishers, and dates of books, articles, reports, letters to the editor, editorial pieces, or other published materials you have written or edited, including materials appearing only on the Internet. (Copies of any such materials may be requested by the Committee.)

- *Avoiding Technology Surprise for Tomorrow's Warfighter--Symposium 2010*, (Reviewer/Editor), Committee for the Symposium on Avoiding Technology Surprise for Tomorrow's Warfighter, National Academies of Science, 2010, <http://www8.nationalacademies.org/cp/committeevew.aspx?key=49211>;
- *Examination of the US Air Force's Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Workforce Needs in the Future and Its Strategy to Meet Those Needs*, (Reviewer/Editor), Committee on Examination of the U.S. Air Force's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Workforce Needs in the Future and Its Strategy to Meet Those Needs, National Research Council, 2010, http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12718

(b) List any reports, memoranda, or policy statements you prepared or contributed in the preparation of on behalf of any association, committee, conference, or organization of which you were or are a member.

- *The Rise of Games and High Performance Computing for Modeling and Simulation (DEPS)*, (Contributing Author of Chapter 4), National Academies of Science, Committee on Modeling, Simulation, and Games - Standing Committee for Technology Insight-Gauge, Evaluate and Review (TIGER), http://sites.nationalacademies.org/DEPS/DEPS_055401, Released January 26, 2010
- Chapter 7: Interagency Interoperability: Redefining "Jointness" (Primary Contributing Author of Chapter 7) from the Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Achieving Interoperability in a Net-Centric Environment – Report Title: *"Creating an Assured Joint DoD and Interagency Interoperable Net-Centric Enterprise"* March 2009 <http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/ADA498577.pdf>

(c) List any testimony, official statements or other communications relating to matters of public policy that you have issued or provided or that others presented on your behalf to public bodies or officials.

None.

(d) List any speeches or talks delivered by you, including commencement speeches, remarks, lectures, panel discussions, conferences, political speeches, and question-and-answer sessions. Include the dates and places where such speeches or talks were given.

- National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency Air Force Birthday, Key Note Speaker, September 18, 2009, Bethesda, MD
- Andrews Joint Base Women's History Month, Key Note Speaker, May 2010, Andrews Joint Base, MD
- 99's Regional Conference, Women in Aviation, Key Note Speaker, October 2007, Leesburg, VA
- AcademyWomen Symposium:-- Subjects: Mentoring Women and Transitioning from Military Service, Panel Member for both, October 2007, October 2008 respectively, Women in Military Service Memorial, Arlington, VA
- Numerous Air Force Briefings and Presentations -- all approved by Public Affairs and on Official Government Business, 2003 -- 2007.

(e) List all interviews you have given to newspapers, magazines or other publications, and radio or television stations (including the dates of such interviews).

- *Mobile Training: Don't Leave Home Without Your Blackberry*, *Training Magazine*, September 21, 2009, <http://www.trainingmag.com/article/mobile-training-dont-leave-home-without-your-blackberry>
- *Leadership in Focus*, Center for Leadership Development and Research, Stanford University, featured training videos on Organizational Culture and Diversity, 2007, http://www.leadershipinfocus.net/2-0/index.cfm?event=location.index§ion=search_results&cat_type=4&cat=Military%2FGovernment&tag
- *Supporting the Future Total Force*, RAND Corporation, Project Air Force, 2007 (Interviewed but not quoted) http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG539.pdf
- *Conversations with Brig. Gen. Allison Hickey*, *Aerospace America*, Nov 2007, https://www.aiaa.org/aerospace/images/articleimages/pdf/Conversations_NOV07.pdf
- *A New Dawn for Total Force*, *Air Force Magazine*, April 12, 2007, <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/Features/organization/Pages/box041207totalforce.aspx>
- *Allison Hickey: A woman of many firsts*, *Air Force News*, March 14, 2007, <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123040074>
- *Guardsmen shift roles to align more with Air Force*, *National Defense Magazine*, Dec 2006, <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/archive/2006/December/Pages/Guardsmen-shift2784.aspx>
- *The future total force: new directorate shaping the Air Force of tomorrow today*, *Citizen Airman*, Dec 1, 2005

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+future+total+force%3A+new+director+shaping+the+Air+Force+of...-a0141173069>

- *USAF To Boost ISR Funding Share, Air Force News, October 2005*
<http://www.airforcecosts.com/portal/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=48>
- *Move to Merge Air Force, Guard Units Derailed by Base Closures, National Defense Magazine, September 2005*
http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/ARCHIVE/2005/SEPTEMBER/Pages/Move_to5608.aspx
- *Looming Budget Cutbacks Underpin Defense Strategy, National Defense Magazine, August 2005*
<http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/archive/2005/August/Pages/DefenseWatch5658.aspx>
- *Senior leaders speak on future total force initiative, Air Force News, June 2005,*
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2005/06/mil-050607-afpn02.htm>
- *Information technology is key to Air Force 2020, Military & Aerospace Electronics, Nov 1, 2004*
<http://www.militaryaerospace.com/index/display/article-display/215428/articles/military-aerospace-electronics/volume-15/issue-11/features/information-technology-is-key-to-air-force-2020.html>
- *Connectivity, Persistent Surveillance Model Future Combat, SIGNAL Magazine, May 2004*
https://www.afcea.org/signal/articles/templates/SIGNAL_Article_Template.asp?articleid=132&zoneid=15
- Documentary: *Wings of their Own, March 2003*

17. Political affiliations and activities

(a) List all financial contributions to any political party or election committee during the last 10 years.

I am unable to find any record making a financial contribution to any political party or election committee. I may have made a contribution of \$100 or less to Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign but have no record of such a contribution so I am unable to confirm its existence.

(b) List all elective public offices for which you have been a candidate and the month and year of each election involved.

None.

(c) List all memberships and offices held in and services rendered, whether compensated or not, to any political party or election committee.

None.

18. Future employment relationships

(a) State whether you will sever all connections with your present employer, business firm, association, or organization if you are confirmed by the Senate.

Yes.

(b) State whether you have any plans after completing Government service to resume employment, affiliation, or practice with your previous employer, business firm, association, or organization.

None.

(c) What commitments, if any, have been made to you for employment after you leave Federal service?

None.

(d) (If appointed for a term of specified duration) Do you intend to serve the full term for which you have been appointed?

Yes.

(e) (If appointed for an indefinite period) Do you intend to serve until the next Presidential election?

Yes.

19. Potential conflicts of interest

(a) Describe any financial arrangements, deferred compensation agreements, or other continuing financial, business, or professional dealings which you have with business associates, clients, or customers who will be affected by policies which you will influence in the position to which you have been nominated.

In connection with the nomination process, I have consulted with the Office of Government Ethics and the Department of Veterans Affairs designated agency ethics official to identify potential conflicts of interest. Any potential conflicts of interest will be resolved in accordance with the terms of an ethics agreement that I have entered into with the Department's designated agency ethics official and that has been provided to this Committee. I am not aware of any other potential conflicts of interest.

(b) List any investments, obligations, liabilities, or other financial relationships which could be affected by policies which you will influence in the position to which you have been nominated.

In connection with the nomination process, I have consulted with the Office of Government Ethics and the Department of Veterans Affairs designated agency ethics official to identify potential conflicts of interest. Any potential conflicts of interest will be resolved in accordance with the terms of an ethics agreement that I have entered into with the Department's designated agency ethics official and that has been provided to this Committee. I am not aware of any other potential conflicts of interest.

(c) Describe any business relationship, dealing, or financial transaction which you have had during the last 5 years, whether for yourself, on behalf of a client, or acting as an agent, that constitutes a potential conflict of interest with the position to which you have been nominated.

In connection with the nomination process, I have consulted with the Office of Government Ethics and the Department of Veterans Affairs designated agency ethics official to identify potential conflicts of interest. Any potential conflicts of interest will be resolved in accordance with the terms of an ethics agreement that I have entered into with the Department's designated agency ethics official and that has been provided to this Committee. I am not aware of any other potential conflicts of interest.

(d) Describe any activity during the past 10 years in which you have engaged for the purpose of directly or indirectly influencing the passage, defeat, or modification of any legislation or affecting the administration and execution of law or public policy. Activities performed as an employee of the Federal government need not be listed.

None.

(e) Explain how you will resolve any potential conflict of interest that may be disclosed by your responses to the above items. (Please provide a copy of any trust or other agreements involved in Part II.)

In connection with the nomination process, I have consulted with the Office of Government Ethics and the Department of Veterans Affairs designated agency ethics official to identify potential conflicts of interest. Any potential conflicts of interest will be resolved in accordance with the terms of an ethics agreement that I have entered into with the Department's designated agency ethics official and that has been provided to this Committee. I am not aware of any other potential conflicts of interest.

20. Testifying before the Congress

(a) Do you agree to appear and testify before any duly constituted committee of the Congress upon the request of such committee?

Yes.

(b) Do you agree to provide such information as is requested by such a committee?

Yes.

[A letter from the Office of Government Ethics follows:]



JAN 24 2011

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

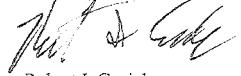
Dear Mr. Chairman:

In accordance with the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, I enclose a copy of the financial disclosure report filed by Allison A. Hickey, who has been nominated by President Obama for the position of Under Secretary for Benefits of the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

We have reviewed the report and have also obtained advice from the agency concerning any possible conflict in light of its functions and the nominee's proposed duties. Also enclosed is an ethics agreement outlining the actions that the nominee will undertake to avoid conflicts of interest. Unless a date for compliance is indicated in the ethics agreement, the nominee must fully comply within three months of confirmation with any action specified in the ethics agreement.

Based thereon, we believe that this nominee is in compliance with applicable laws and regulations governing conflicts of interest.

Sincerely,



Robert L. Cusick
Director

Enclosures

[Letter from the nominee to the Office of Legal Counsel, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs:]

January 7, 2011

Mr. Walter A. Hall (023)
Assistant General Counsel and
Designated Agency Ethics Official
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Hall:

The purpose of this letter is to describe the steps that I will take to avoid any actual or apparent conflict of interest in the event that I am confirmed for the position of Under Secretary for Benefits of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

As required by 18 U.S.C. § 208(a), I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter that has a direct and predictable effect on my financial interests or those of any person whose interests are imputed to me, unless I first obtain a written waiver, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1), or qualify for a regulatory exemption, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(2). I understand that the interests of the following persons are imputed to me: any spouse or minor child of mine; any general partner of a partnership in which I am a limited or general partner; any organization in which I serve as officer, director, trustee, general partner or employee; and any person or organization with which I am negotiating or have an arrangement concerning prospective employment.

I currently serve as a Program Manager for Accenture National Security Services, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Accenture. Upon confirmation I will resign this position. For a period of one year after my resignation, I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter involving specific parties in which Accenture is a party or represents a party, unless I am first authorized to participate, pursuant to 5 C.F.R. § 2635.502(d).

I currently serve as a trustee of the United States Air Force Academy Falcon Foundation. Upon confirmation I will resign from this position. For a period of one year after my resignation, I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter involving specific parties in which this entity is a party or represents a party, unless I am first authorized to participate, pursuant to 5 C.F.R. § 2635.502(d).

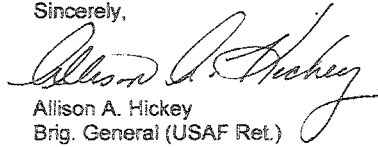
I am also a member of the AcademyWomen Board of Advisors; and a member of the National Academy of Science Standing Committee for Technology, Insight and Gauge, Evaluate and Review. Upon confirmation, I will resign from these positions.

2.

Walter A. Hall (023)

Finally, I understand that as an appointee I am required to sign the Ethics Pledge (Exec. Order No. 13490) and that I will be bound by the requirements and restrictions therein in addition to the commitments I have made in this and any other ethics agreement.

Sincerely,



Allison A. Hickey
Brig. General (USAF Ret.)

Chairman MURRAY. Thank you very much, General Hickey.
Mr. Muro.

STATEMENT OF STEVE L. MURO, NOMINEE TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. MURO. Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

It is a great honor to be the President's nominee to serve as Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs for the Department of Veterans Affairs, National Cemetery Administration. I am honored by the trust Secretary Shinseki has placed in me.

The National Cemetery Administration is meeting the needs of veterans through innovation and increased access to benefits. We are providing a lasting tribute to veterans across the centuries, from the Civil War to the conflicts of today.

Before I continue, let me also recognize the veterans service organizations in the room today. I want to thank them. Throughout my career, they have been a support, and I appreciate all the support they have given me.

If confirmed, I intend to continue that close collaboration, leveraging their ideas to find and implement solutions for our veterans.

NCA is truly a remarkable organization where a wage-grade auto mechanic, such as myself, may rise through the ranks to the position of Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. I have devoted my entire career to serving the organization in various positions including: Cemetery Director, Director of Memorial Service Network V, Director of the Office of Field Programs, Deputy Under Secretary, my current position as Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

In these senior leadership positions, I directed the largest expansion of the National Cemetery System since the Civil War, by planning, constructing, and opening 11 new national cemeteries.

The entire organization is committed to serving veterans and their families with the highest level of customer service. For four consecutive times over the last decade, the National Cemetery Administration has achieved the top rating in the Nation on the American Customer Satisfaction Index, established by the University of Michigan.

NCA's scores exceeded those of over 100 Federal agencies and the Nation's top corporations such as Ford, FedEx and Coca Cola. We are not surprised by these scores and results since more than 70 percent of our workforce are veterans.

NCA leads Federal agencies in the percentage of employees that are veterans, including 190 veterans who have served in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. NCA accomplishments are due to relentless focus on three goals: fostering a culture of accountability, maintaining our national cemeteries as national shrines; and, most importantly, meeting and exceeding the expectations of veterans and their families in the one chance NCA has to serve them as we commit their loved ones to their final resting place.

During my 33-year career, I have expanded burial access so that nearly 90 percent of veterans benefit from a burial option in a national cemetery or State veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence.

We have incorporated state-of-the-art technology for record keeping and claims processing and we have instituted organizational standards and performance measures across all business lines.

Our management approach has made our operations more efficient. Our National Cemetery Training Center reinforces customer, service and performance standards by addressing professional development throughout NCA. Our National Scheduling Office centralizes eligibility determinations and scheduling across the system.

If confirmed, under my leadership, NCA will continue to focus on innovations, partnerships, and efficiencies. For example, by using pre-placed crypts nationwide, we have saved land and reduced maintenance and operational costs.

We are generating renewable energy by harnessing wind and solar power, employing new technologies to improve accountability and reaching out to the newest generation of servicemembers and their families with social media.

In addition, we are embarking on a study of emerging burial practices and surveying our veterans and their families for their preferences for memorial benefits.

Our partnerships with the States through the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program are vital to meeting veterans' burial needs in rural and tribal areas. Recently, Congress expanded the grant program so that we may assist States in meeting national shrine standards of appearance with operations and maintenance grants.

If confirmed, I will continue to be a tireless steward of the national cemeteries entrusted to our care that serve as national shrines that honor the sacrifices of the Nation's veterans.

I am grateful for the opportunity to come before you this morning to offer my vision for this agency to which I have dedicated my life's work.

Thank you again. I look forward to answering your questions.
[The prepared statement of Mr. Muro follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF STEVE L. MURO, NOMINEE TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR
MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee: good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is a great honor to be here today as the President's nominee to serve as Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)'s National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

I would like to introduce my family here with me—Dr. Linda Johnson, and my daughter, Amanda—and although not able to attend, I would like to acknowledge my son, Steve, my daughter-in-law, Rebecca, and my grandson, Stevie—without their help and support, I would not be here before you today.

In my current position as Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, I am honored by the trust Secretary Shinseki has placed in me, and in the dedicated men and women I am privileged to lead, in serving Veterans and their families. In concert with the Veterans Benefits and Veterans Health Administrations, the National Cemetery Administration is meeting the needs of Veterans through innovation and increased access to benefits. We are doing this today based on a long-standing tradition of providing a lasting tribute to Veterans across the centuries, from the Civil War to the conflicts today in Iraq and Afghanistan. If confirmed, I am committed to continuing that important work.

Before I continue, let me also recognize the presence here today of our Veterans Service Organizations. I have worked with many of them throughout my career and I have greatly appreciated their support and counsel. If confirmed, I intend to continue that close collaboration, leveraging their ideas to find and implement solutions for our Veterans and their families.

NCA is truly a remarkable organization where a Wage Grade auto mechanic, such as myself, may rise through the ranks based on a commitment to serve Veterans “who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan” and serve in the position of Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. I have devoted my entire career to fulfilling NCA's mission while serving in various positions throughout the organization. Following my service in the U.S. Navy, I served in many NCA leadership positions including leading and directing the staffs of six different national cemeteries, overseeing 18 cemeteries in seven western States as the Director of Memorial Service Network V, serving as the Director of the Office of Field Programs in Central Office and later as Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, leading me to my current position. In these senior leadership positions, I have had the opportunity, working with the talented employees of NCA, to direct the largest expansion of the National Cemetery System since the Civil War—planning, constructing and opening 11 new national cemeteries.

Based on my broad experience, I can tell you that every level of the organization is committed to serving Veterans and their families with the highest level of customer service. NCA achieved the top rating in the Nation four consecutive times on the prestigious American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) established by the University of Michigan. On the most recent 2010 survey and over the past decade, NCA's scores exceeded those of over 100 Federal agencies and the Nation's top corporations including Ford, FedEx and Coca Cola. Our own surveys of our customers confirm this exceptional level of performance. In 2010, 98% of our survey respondents rated the appearance of national cemeteries as excellent; and 95% rated the quality of service as excellent.

We are not surprised by these results since more than 70 percent of our workforce has served in our Armed Forces. NCA leads Federal agencies in the percentage of employees who are Veterans, including over 190 Veterans who have served in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

NCA accomplishments are due to relentless focus on three goals: 1) fostering a culture of accountability; 2) maintaining our national cemeteries as national shrines by continually improving our operations and performance standards; and 3) most importantly, meeting and exceeding the expectations of Veterans and family members in the one chance NCA has to serve them in their hour of need, as we commit their loved ones to their final resting places.

I am proud to be part of an organization that continually seeks to raise the bar and look for new ways to serve Veterans and their families. During my 33-year career, we have expanded burial access so that nearly 90% of Veterans—about 20 million—benefit from a burial option in a National or State Veterans cemetery within

75 miles of their residence; we have incorporated state-of-the-art-technology for recordkeeping and claims processing; and we have instituted comprehensive organizational standards and performance measures across all business lines.

Our eligibility experts staff a centralized Scheduling Office operating 7:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. CST, 7 days a week (362 days/year). Our National Training Center reinforces customer service and performance standards by addressing professional development at every level of our workforce, from grounds maintenance to grief counseling and supervisor training. If confirmed, my focus will continue to be to provide the best service through efficiencies, innovations, and partnerships.

Today, by using pre-placed crypts nationwide, we save land and reduce our maintenance and operational costs; these efficiencies ensure we can provide burial access for more years and are an example of NCA leading the industry with best practices. We are generating renewable energy by harnessing wind and solar power, employing technologies like Geographic Information Systems to improve accountability, and reaching out to the newest generation of Servicemembers and their families with social media and other emerging outlets. In addition, we are embarking on a study of emerging burial practices and surveying our Veterans and their families for their preferences for memorial benefits that honor their military service.

Our partnerships with the States through the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program are vital to meeting Veterans' burial needs in rural and tribal areas. Recently, Congress expanded the grant program, so now we may assist States in meeting national shrine standards of appearance with operations and maintenance grants.

If confirmed, I will apply my intimate knowledge of NCA in collaboration with Veterans and their families, Veterans Service Organizations and Congress to meet the evolving needs of a new generation of Veterans. I will continue to be a tireless steward of the national cemeteries entrusted to our care that serve as national shrines that honor the sacrifices of our Nation's Veterans. I am grateful for the opportunity to come before you this morning to offer my vision for this agency to which I have dedicated my life's work. Thank you again.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

RESPONSE TO PREHEARING QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. PATTY MURRAY TO STEVE MURO TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Question 1. Have you formulated any thoughts on what your job responsibilities will be and how you will approach those responsibilities if confirmed?

Response. Having served as Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs for the last two years, I am very familiar with the roles and responsibilities of this position and if confirmed I look forward to continuing my work fulfilling them. Dignity and respect for Veterans and their families is, and if confirmed will be, at the center of my work. During the time I have served as Acting Under Secretary, NCA has strengthened its processes and has served Veterans and their families with high levels of dignity, compassion, and customer service. My approach has been and if confirmed will remain one that is people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking.

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), administered by the University of Michigan, has recently completed its assessment of more than 225 private sector companies and 100 public organizations who participated in the national customer satisfaction index. On January 25, 2011, the Federal Consulting Group, a Federal agency fee-for-service franchise operation within the Department of Interior and created by an act of Congress, presented the Fifth Annual Customer Satisfaction Achievement Award to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) in recognition of our commitment to outstanding customer service to U.S. Armed Forces Veterans and their next of kin. This commitment has been demonstrated by achieving extraordinarily high customer satisfaction scores throughout the last decade—the highest in government and the ACSI overall. If confirmed, I intend to continue leading NCA in achieving unsurpassed levels of customer satisfaction in 2012 and beyond through sound leadership and investment in our valued resources, including people, training, and processes.

If confirmed, I will continue to keep our Veterans and their loved ones at the forefront by pursuing even greater levels of service and satisfaction in meeting our solemn obligation to maintain VA's National Cemeteries as National Shrines. I will also continue to sustain the important work with State partners, through the State Cemetery Grants Program, to assist them in establishing, expanding and improving State Veterans cemeteries.

Question 2. How would you describe your management style and how is it suited to this particular position?

Response. Having started my career at a very different stage in the cemetery process, as a WG-9 mechanic, I have a management style that considers the health, effectiveness, and efficiency of the entire organization. While fulfilling the NCA's vision and mission, my management style tends to consider the entire workforce and the entire suite of roles and responsibilities. I am known to have a participatory and collaborative approach and, in my view, the NCA employees and leaders are more engaged in the decisionmaking process as a result of their involvement in discussions and planning. The staff members feel a real sense of contribution in the decisionmaking process and therefore feel ownership of our successes. I have witnessed how this management style energizes the employees and strengthens their sense of responsibility and ownership, especially in serving our Veterans and family members. There is amazing dedication and expertise throughout the 131 National Cemeteries, the five Memorial Service Networks, and Central Office. The staff has an enormous amount of experience that is beneficial to NCA and how we conduct our business. I believe the recent ACSI award is a reflection, in part, of my management style and the empowerment felt by the employees, especially as it translates into caring for Veterans and their families.

Question 3. Have you and Secretary Shinseki discussed the duties and the role you would assume as Director of the National Cemetery Administration if you are confirmed? If so, what specific areas of the job were discussed?

Response. As Acting Under Secretary for NCA for the last two years, I have had frequent opportunities to discuss the leadership and functions of the NCA with Secretary Shinseki. I meet with Secretary Shinseki on a weekly basis and have discussed his expectations of me as the leader of NCA including his goals and objectives for NCA. My approach has been, and if confirmed will continue to be, in direct alignment with his goals of being people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking. NCA's role is to honor our Veterans and loved ones with their final resting places. We have one chance to get it right and we try our very best to make that happen.

Question 4. Are there any specific problems or challenges that you have already identified that you would like to tackle in this new position?

NCA is continually identifying opportunities to ensure our cemeteries have the resources required to meet the needs of our Veterans and family members. I am constantly seeking cost-saving and innovative ways to ensure NCA's ability to meet the Veterans' needs of today and in the future. Some of the efficiencies and innovations that have been put into place over the past two years that I have served as Acting Under Secretary are an indication of the types of initiatives I would continue to work on, if confirmed.

For example, NCA is applying new concepts and innovations to our cemetery processes. These include: the application of the system-wide use of crypts to preserve land and reduce maintenance/operating costs; application of "water-wise" landscaping that conserves water and other resources; installation of alternative energy products such as wind turbines and solar technologies that supply power to facilities; utilization of bio-based fuels that are homegrown and less damaging to the environment; and installation of innovative headstone/marker foundations to ensure long-term height and alignment. Another effort has been to ensure effective obligation of the \$50 million provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for national shrine projects, equipment and infrastructure repairs. To ensure responsive service through burial options for Veterans, we are evaluating other burial practices such as "green" burials and rural burial options. Through the First Notice of Death Office (FNOD) established in October 2009, we successfully discontinued \$56 million in benefit payments for deceased beneficiaries and avoided possible collection actions on benefit recipients.

If confirmed, I would continue to focus efforts on technology and other improvements that would allow NCA to improve upon the already successful tracking and monitoring of decedents and gravesites.

Question 5. Oftentimes, the only contact that a Veteran and his/her family will have with VA is through the National Cemetery Administration. What will you do to make certain that this contact remains positive?

Response. NCA continues to lead the Government in customer satisfaction, and if confirmed I will lead this organization to sustain and where possible improve this high level of satisfaction. I will maintain an emphasis on training for excellence throughout the National Cemetery Administration. From the groundskeeper to the Cemetery Director, our employees are actively involved in the process of fostering a culture of consistency and excellence across all areas of cemetery operations. From the minute contact is made with our National Scheduling Office until our Veterans or family members are honored at their final resting place, our customers should be treated with the utmost dignity and respect. In my view, training is the corner-

stone of this process, and if confirmed, NCA will make every means available to our employees and leadership to continue to strive for National Shrine status at our 131 Cemeteries.

Question 6. What are your thoughts on the increasing demand for ecologically-friendly interments and burial facilities and how do you envision that could impact the NCA?

Response. Currently, a study is underway regarding ecologically-friendly interments and burial facilities that will examine alternative methods that could benefit NCA and the environment. Another area of our focus is energy efficiency. Presently, NCA has a wind turbine in place at Bourne National Cemetery, MA, which provides 90% of the cemetery's energy needs. To conserve natural resources in the West, four of our cemeteries have implemented water-wise capabilities. For example, the Bakersfield National Cemetery in California has utilized natural desert soil, ground cover of natural materials, and drought resistant and indigenous plants. At San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery in California, burial areas are seeded with a grass mix that resists drought. Fort Bliss National Cemetery in Texas has converted to water-wise landscaping. The National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona in Arizona uses a ground cover comprised of decomposed granite that is landscaped with plants adapted to grow in sand and seven miles of drip irrigation tubing supply water to the 1,800 plants. If confirmed, I will ensure NCA constantly seeks ways to conserve natural resources and strives to become even more ecologically-friendly.

Question 7. What do you believe will be your most daunting challenge and how will you confront it?

Response. If confirmed, my most significant challenge will be ensuring and maintaining an excellent and effective workforce. Retirements, interest in upward mobility, career changes and ambitions are a few of the reasons why the workforce will undoubtedly change. If confirmed, I must ensure that NCA has effective succession planning that sustains a high caliber, professional workforce. To do this, I must maintain a highly successful and dynamic administration and management team that recruits, develops, and retains the right staff. In addition we will need to achieve optimum training at all levels, and provide inclusion and on-boarding activities to keep staff abreast of the organization's activities, priorities, needs, and opportunities for change and growth.

Question 8. If confirmed, what would you most like to leave as your legacy?

Response. If confirmed, I would want to leave behind a legacy of sustained commitment to quality where people will ask "how does the National Cemetery Administration do it?" I would like NCA to be the model for customer satisfaction in government and the private sector. If confirmed, I will keep NCA focused on our core methods for achieving this excellence in service, making sure we have the best trained employees who respect our mission and want to honor our Veterans and their loved ones, as they would want to have their loved ones treated. It is also about leadership that empowers employees to be visionaries and to always look for new ways to improve. In addition, if confirmed, creating new urban national cemeteries is an initiative that I would like to see fulfilled, and I look forward to working with Congress on this opportunity.

[The Committee questionnaire for Presidential nominees follows:]

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEES

PART I: ALL OF THE INFORMATION IN THIS PART WILL BE MADE PUBLIC

1. **Name** (Including any former names used). Steve Louis Muro
2. **Address** (List current residence, office and mailing addresses).

<u>Residence:</u> 13420 Classic Court Woodbridge, VA 22192-4502	<u>Office:</u> Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration (40) 810 Vermont Avenue NW Washington, DC 20420
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3. **Position to which nominated.** Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs
4. **Date of nomination.** January 5, 2011
5. **Date of birth** (Month, day, year). August 22, 1949
6. **Place of birth** (City, state, country). Orange, CA, USA
7. **Marital status.** Divorced
8. **Full name of spouse** (including maiden name). Not applicable.
9. **Names and ages of children.** Steve Louis Muro, Jr., age 38 and Amanda Michelle Muro, age 35
10. **Education** (List all post-secondary institutions of higher learning, dates attended, degree(s) received, and date degree(s) granted).

<u>Mount San Antonio College</u> 1100 North Grand Avenue Walnut, CA 91789 September 1978 - June 1981 Associate of Arts degree, 1981	<u>Riverside Community College</u> 4800 Magnolia Avenue Riverside, CA 92506 September 1976 - September 1978 No degree
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11. **Honors and Awards** (List all scholarships, fellowships, honorary degrees, honorary society memberships, and any other special recognition for outstanding service or achievement).
 - Presidential Meritorious Executive Rank Award - 2008
 - Numerous performance awards throughout federal career - 1985-2009
 - Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal - 1969
 - Vietnam Medal - 1969
 - Meritorious Service Medal - 1968

12. **Memberships** (List all memberships and offices held in professional, fraternal, business, scholarly, civic, charitable, and other organizations for the last ten years. Include the dates of any such memberships or offices).

- Senior Executives Association, Member: 2006 – Present
- Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Life Member: 1970 – Present
- Leadership VA Alumni Association, Life Member: 1996 – Present

13. **Employment record** (List all employment (except military service) since your twenty-first birthday, including the title, description of job, name of employer, location of work, and inclusive dates of employment).

01/2009 – Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA),
Present National Cemetery Administration (NCA), Washington, DC

- Lead NCA's transformation into a 21st century organization that is 'Veteran-centric,' forward looking and results driven. Partnering with Veterans Health Administration and Veterans Benefits Administration to achieve the transformation of VA to better serve Veterans and their families, now and in the future.
- Oversee 131 National Cemeteries to ensure dignified burial services for military Veterans and eligible family members are provided and the cemeteries are maintained as national shrines.
- Lead land acquisition, design, construction and other activities related to the establishment of new national cemeteries. Five new cemeteries and four large urban columbarium-only cemeteries are planned to be opened by 2015.
- Direct other memorial programs for Veterans including the provision of headstones, markers, and Presidential Memorial Certificates to honor the service of deceased Veterans.
- Administer federal grants to help states, territories and tribal governments establish Veterans' cemeteries.
- Assist the U.S. National Park Service in their implementation of national shrine standards for cemeteries they maintain.

10/2008 – Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, VA, NCA, Washington, DC
01/2009

- Led multiple activities required for timely opening of four new cemeteries. This was the largest expansion of the national cemeteries since the Civil War.
- Led a policy change that required pre-placed crypts at all new National Cemeteries and all future construction at current National Cemeteries. These crypts reduce land usage and maintenance costs by approximately 50 percent compared to current cemetery practice.
- Led establishment of the First Notice of Death Office in NCA to process Veterans' death claims and stop future benefits such as payment of disability compensation and pensions and mailing of medications. During the first year 356,405 claims were processed and \$17.4 million was saved.

01/2005 - Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, VA, NCA, Washington, DC
11/2005

- Led the following Services: Field Programs that oversees five Memorial Service Networks, 120 National Cemeteries and 33 Soldiers' Lots, Monument Sites and Confederate Cemeteries throughout the United States and Puerto Rico; Finance; Construction; State Cemetery Grants; Communications, Outreach, and Management Support.
- Participated in the preparations for several Congressional hearings regarding future land acquisitions and fiscal planning.

12/2002 - Acting Director/Director, Office of Field Programs, VA, NCA, Washington, DC
10/2008

- Led five Memorial Service Networks, 120 National Cemeteries and 33 Soldiers' Lots, Monument Sites and Confederate Cemeteries throughout the United States and Puerto Rico
- Enabled the transfer of Memorial Programs Service to Office of Field Programs to enhance communications and services to the national and private cemeteries.
- Maintained regular and open communications with Congress, other government agencies, Veterans' Service Organizations, families of decedents, funeral directors and medical representatives. Participated in formal ceremonies and other public functions.
- Increased from 49 to 95 percent the number of permanent headstones or markers that were installed within 60 days from the date of burial. The average number of days for installing permanent headstones or markers was 27 days by the end of tenure in the position. Led the activities for opening five new National Cemeteries that resulted in enhanced services for Veterans and their families. This increased from 87 to 90 percent of Veterans who have a burial option in a State or National Cemetery within 75 miles.
- Established NCA Training Center in St. Louis to provide centralized training for cemetery directors, foremen, representatives, and caretakers.
- Established and led the implementation of a new centralized year-long Cemetery Director Internship Program.
- Established a National Cemetery Scheduling Office that enables funeral homes and families to schedule burials at any national cemetery in the U.S. This allows scheduling to be accomplished seven days a week.
- Established a centralized NCA Human Resources Center that supports all national cemeteries and Memorial Network Services across the nation, thereby improving quality, timeliness, and consistency of human resource actions.

03/2001 - Director, Memorial Service Network (MSN) V, VA, NCA, Oakland, CA
12/2002

- Established a new MSN Office within 90 days by negotiating for office space, developing the office organizational structure, and selecting a diverse staff of eight professionals and administrative support staff. Involved key MSN individuals in strategic planning. Had full authority for developing and managing the MSN budget and making financial commitments. Developed and implemented MSN-wide administrative, financial and other resource management policies.
- Led cemetery directors at 15 national cemeteries in the western U.S., including Hawaii. This included over 265 cemetery staff and MSN V Office staff including an

engineer and agronomist. In Fiscal Year 2002 there were approximately 23,700 interments in MSN V, which was 27% of the NCA total and 10% more than any other MSN. Reviewed submissions from the cemeteries for major and minor constructions projects. Prioritized submissions and managed funding that was received from VA Central Office. Prepared, reviewed, and revised specifications for maintenance and repair contracts, and contractor supplied materials and equipment. Oversaw project coordination with architect/engineer firms, VA Central Office and servicing stations.

05/2000 - Acting Director, Western Area Office, VA, NCA, Denver, CO (while also in position below)
09/2000

- The Western Area was composed of 28 National Cemeteries and three soldier's lots in the Western U.S., including Alaska and Hawaii. In Fiscal Year 2000 there were approximately 32,700 interments in the Western Area with over 435 cemetery staff in the Area.
- Had line authority for the management of the national cemeteries and miscellaneous activities within the Western Area. Participated in managing the work activities of the subordinate cemetery facilities through developing and administering short- and long-range plans for resource allocation and other selective procedures and controls.

06/1999 - Acting Director, Golden Gate and San Francisco National Cemeteries, VA, NCA,
02/2001 San Francisco, CA

- Volunteered for reassignment to this position and transformed and improved the operations, appearance and staff morale of both national cemeteries, including special emphasis on the enhancement of labor-management relations at Golden Gate National Cemetery.
- Directed the operations of two national cemeteries. Golden Gate National Cemetery was a 169-acre facility with 44 Full Time Employee Equivalents (FTEE). Over 134,000 individuals were buried at the cemetery with over 111,500 occupied gravesites, over 4,000 reserved gravesites and over 500 memorial sites. San Francisco National Cemetery was a small, historic cemetery where 36 Medal of Honor Recipients are interred, second only to Arlington National Cemetery.
- Significantly improved the labor-management relations at Golden Gate National Cemetery resulting in both labor and management working together to bring the cemetery up to the standards of a national shrine.
- Coached the employee teams in re-engineering their operations to improve effectiveness and efficiency. Benchmarking and quality improvement techniques were implemented and enhanced to improve cemetery administrative and field programs.
- Enhanced the cemetery's Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program, designed to reintroduce patients into the workforce, by improving the relationship with the VA Medical Center. The CWT program generated a positive impact on the entire cemetery operation while assisting Veterans in their recoveries.

08/1995 - Director, Fort Snelling National Cemetery, VA, NCA, Minneapolis, MN
06/1999

- This 430-acre cemetery was the fourth busiest national cemetery with an annual interment rate of 4,100 and over 114,400 occupied gravesites to maintain.
- Directed the cemetery by providing leadership, training, coaching, guiding and mentoring the assistant cemetery director and team leaders in administrative operations, facility and equipment maintenance, interment operations and grounds maintenance. These team leaders managed 35 permanent and 24 temporary employees.
- Managed the volunteer program with approximately 150 volunteers who provided military honors to eligible Veterans at committal services. This was the largest volunteer program in NCA.
- Initiated the Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program with the Minnesota State Veterans Home.
- Focused cemetery teams' efforts on improving appearance of cemeteries and strengthened relationships with Veterans Service Organizations.
- Facilitated business plans for Western Area cemeteries. Participated in the NCA Advisory Team and the Western Area Improvement Teams in Strategic Planning, Resource Management, Training, Equipment, Level of Maintenance, and Business Plans. Consistently worked with cemetery, Western Area, and NCA teams to find the most effective way to accomplish tasks.
- Key member of the Resource Management Team (RMT) established by the Western Area Director to setup, monitor and distribute the budgeted resources to Western Area cemeteries in order to maximize the use of available resources. The RMT identified all tasks required for cemetery operations, determined the time needed for each task by conducting time studies at multiple cemeteries, determined the equipment and other resources needed, identified other factors that impact the operations and calculated FTEE needed. These methods were shared with Central Office and the other two Area Offices.

08/1988 - Assistant Director, Riverside National Cemetery, VA, NCA, Riverside, CA
08/1995

- During tenure, Riverside National Cemetery was the second busiest national cemetery in VA. The 740-acre facility, with 288 developed acres employed 68 FTEE. The cemetery had an annual interment rate of 6,000 with over 83,000 individuals buried.
- Developed and implemented local administrative, financial and other resource management policies. Had full authority to manage the cemetery and make commitments. Organized and realigned the workforce to maximize productivity. Directed employee teams in their short and long-range planning.
- Managed the employee labor relations and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) programs. Member of newly organized Labor Management Partnership Committee.

10/1985 - Director, Long Island and Cypress Hills National Cemeteries, VA, NCA, Long Island, NY
08/1988

- Directed the activities of Long Island and Cypress Hills National Cemeteries. Long Island National Cemetery had the largest FTEE and the fifth highest interment rate in NCA. The cemetery encompassed 364 acres and had approximately 280,000 individuals buried there. Supervised an Assistant Director, General Foreman and four field supervisors, and approximately 90 staff. Cypress Hills National Cemetery

was maintained under contract. Responsible for ensuring that the contract specifications were met.

- Developed, evaluated and adjusted the organizational structure and management systems to accomplish more efficient operation of the cemetery. Used a variety of hiring policies to match seasonal needs with appropriate workforce levels. Practices were shared with other cemetery directors who implemented them in several other national cemeteries.
- Directed operations, administrative, and maintenance functions to ensure that the Cemetery's and VA's missions were carried out according to VA standards and guidelines. Emphasized continuous quality improvement.
- Promoted good relations with a variety of groups, organizations and individuals including next of kin, staff, servicing station, congressional liaisons, union and community organizations. Represented VA and the cemetery when asked to speak at a variety of ceremonies and meetings.

02/1985 - Assistant Director, Long Island and Cypress Hills National Cemetery, VA, NCA, Long Island, NY
10/1985

- Managed interment and maintenance activities and administration functions such as fiscal, supply, and human resources. Reviewed the work of subordinate employees to ensure VA and NCA policies, procedures, and goals were met. Using allotted resources, realigned the organization to improve the appearance of the cemetery.
- Worked with the Cemetery Director to ensure cemetery goals and objectives were met.

02/1984 - Director, Baton Rouge and Port Hudson National Cemeteries, VA, NCA, Baton Rouge, LA
02/1985

- Managed interment and maintenance activities and administration functions such as fiscal, supply, and human resources. Reviewed the work of subordinate employees to ensure VA and NCA policies, procedures, and goals were met. Using allotted resources, realigned the organization to improve the appearance of the cemetery.
- Spoke at Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies and other outreach activities.

01/1983 - Assistant to the Director, Los Angeles National Cemetery, VA, NCA, Los Angeles, CA
02/1984

- Managed the cemetery's administrative activities such as human resources, supply, and fiscal operations.
- Participated in public relations activities.
- Was Co-Manager of the EEO Hispanic Program at the West Los Angeles VA Hospital which was the servicing station for the cemetery.

11/1981 - Cemetery Director Trainee, Riverside National Cemetery, VA, NCA, Riverside, CA
01/1983

- Completed a VA Central Office sponsored one-year training program that was implemented at the cemetery. The program focused on learning administrative and office duties, interments, maintenance of equipment, structures, turf, and gravesites/headstones/markers. Served as acting grounds maintenance foreman,

acting interment foreman, acting assistant cemetery director, and acting director.
Completed details serving as acting assistant cemetery director at another cemetery
and acting cemetery director at two other cemeteries.

09/1981 - Grounds Maintenance Foreman, West Los Angeles VA Hospital (now part of VA Greater
11/1981 Los Angeles Healthcare System), VA, Veterans Health Administration (VHA),
Los Angeles, CA

- Planned, organized, and directed the workflow of the grounds maintenance section at one of the largest VA hospitals. The equipment maintenance section was responsible for preventive maintenance and repairs of approximately 250 pieces of equipment which included trimmers, mowing tractors, other turf maintenance equipment, backhoes, pickups and sedans. The two grounds maintenance sections were responsible for 380 acres of turf, flower beds, trees and roadways. Managed the landscape and grounds maintenance activities at the off-site outpatient clinic.

05/1979 - Grounds Maintenance Foreman, Los Angeles National Cemetery, VA, NCA, Los Angeles,
09/1981 CA

- Planned, organized, and directed the workflow of the grounds maintenance that was responsible for preventive maintenance and repairs of pieces of equipment including trimmers, mowing tractors, other turf maintenance equipment, backhoes, pickups and sedans. The section was also responsible for turf, flower beds, trees and roadways.

05/1978 - Maintenance Mechanic, Los Angeles National Cemetery, VA, NCA, Los Angeles, CA
05/1979

- Repaired and performed preventive maintenance for all grounds maintenance equipment.

10/1975 - Maintenance Mechanic, Sepulveda VA Hospital (now part of VA Greater Los Angeles
05/1978 Healthcare System), VA, VHA, Sepulveda, CA

- Repaired and performed preventive maintenance of mechanical equipment within hospital.

05/1975 - Maintenance Mechanic, West Los Angeles VA Hospital, (now part of VA Greater Los
10/1975 Angeles Healthcare System), VA, VHA, Los Angeles, CA

- Repaired and performed preventive maintenance of mechanical equipment within hospital.

05/1973 - Maintenance Mechanic, Topham & Sons, Riverside, CA
05/1975

- Repaired trucks, tractors, conveyors; overhauled engines, transmissions, and differentials on large, over-the-road trucks.

11/1972 - Field Equipment Servicer and Repairman, Massey Ferguson Tractor Company,
05/1973 Garden Grove, CA

- Repaired and performed preventive maintenance of heavy construction equipment.

04/1972 - Field Equipment Servicer and Repairman, Bladensburg Equipment Company,
11/1972 Bladensburg, MD

- Repaired and performed preventive maintenance of heavy construction equipment.

14. Military service (List all military service (including reserve components and National Guard or Air National Guard) with inclusive dates of service, rank, titles, permanent duty stations and units of assignment, descriptions of assignments, any military medals, and type of discharge).

04/1972 Washington, DC. Honorably discharged from U.S. Navy, Construction Mechanic
Constructionman (CMCN).

08/1970 - Port Hueneme Naval Base, CA. Mobile Construction Battalion (MCB) 10. Field training
04/1972 with deployments to Okinawa and Spain, CMCN.

04/1970 - U.S. Naval Hospitals in Guam and Long Beach, CA. Recovering from injuries to legs/back,
08/1970 CMCN.

02/1970 - Republic of Vietnam, Naval Support Activities, DaNang. Heavy equipment mechanic
04/1970 , CMCN.

01/1970 - Coronado Island Naval Base, San Diego, CA Survival Training, CMCN.
02/1970

09/1969 - Port Hueneme Naval Base, Port Hueneme, CA. Seaman changed to CMCN. Attended
01/1970 school to become heavy equipment mechanic in Construction Battalion (Seabees).

09/1968 - U.S.S. Benjamin Stoddert, DDG-22, Seaman. Received Armed Forces Expeditionary
09/1969 Medal and Vietnam Medal.

06/1968 - San Diego Naval Recruitment Center. Initial training. Seaman Recruit promoted to
09/1968 Seaman Apprentice, Received Meritorious Service Medal.

15. Government service record (List any advisory, consultative, honorary, or other part-time service or positions with Federal, State, or local governments other than those listed under Employment record, above).

None.

16. Published writings and public statements (in last 10 years)

(a) List the titles, publishers, and dates of books, articles, reports, letters to the editor, editorial pieces, or other published materials you have written or edited, including materials appearing only on the Internet. (Copies of any such materials may be requested by the Committee.)

- I had an article published in the Department of Veteran Affairs in-house magazine, "Vanguard". The article is entitled, "National Cemeteries: Transforming for the 21st Century", and was published in the Winter 2009/2010 issue, http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/vanguard/vanguard_10_winter.pdf
- I authored a blog piece for VA's official Blog, Vantage Point, entitled "Just One Chance to Get It Right", February 2, 2011, <http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/?author=40>
- I have written letters to the editors of local newspapers to announce the Groundbreaking/Dedication Ceremonies of six new national cemeteries.
- National and Local News Releases are periodically issued, usually from the Department level, some of which contain quotes from me.
- The National Cemetery Administration is accessible via Facebook and Twitter. Occasional quotes from me are posted.
- In December 2009, I began an official National Cemetery Administration Blog on the National Cemetery Intranet. The dates and subjects of my entries were:

Dec. 12, 2009	Welcome to Final Honors, new NCA Community Online Blog
Jan. 8, 2010	Burial in National Cemeteries of Non-Veterans Parents of KIA (Killed in Action)

(b) List any reports, memoranda, or policy statements you prepared or contributed in the preparation of on behalf of any association, committee, conference, or organization of which you were or are a member.

I have not prepared or contributed in the preparation of any written reports, memoranda or policy statements on behalf of any association, committee, conference or organization of which I am or was a member.

(c) List any testimony, official statements or other communications relating to matters of public policy that you have issued or provided or that others presented on your behalf to public bodies or officials.

I have provided testimony and contributed to testimony relating to the National Cemetery Administration to the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs, including to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs (HVA) Subcommittee on Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs (DAMA). Below are the dates and subjects:

Testimony & Statements:

- 06/23/10 HVAC Oversight and Investigation Subcommittee Hearing: "Emergency Preparedness: Evaluating the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Fourth Mission" (NCA contributed to testimony delivered by non-NCA VA witness)
- 05/19/10 SVAC Hearing: "Pending Legislation" (NCA contributed to testimony delivered by non-NCA VA witness)
- 04/15/10 HVAC Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Hearing: "Status of Veterans Employment" (NCA contributed to testimony delivered by non-NCA VA witness)
- 10/08/09 HVAC DAMA Hearing: "Legislative Hearing on H.R. 761, H.R. 2243, H.R. 3485, H.R. 3544, and Draft Legislation" (Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Muro as witness)
- 10/14/09 HVAC Hearing: "Update on the State of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs" (NCA contributed to testimony delivered by non-NCA VA witness)
- 09/24/09 HVAC DAMA Hearing: "Honoring the Fallen: How Can We Better Serve America's Veterans and Their Families?" (Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Muro as witness)
- 04/29/09 Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs (SVAC) Hearing: "Hearing on pending benefits-related legislation." (NCA contributed to testimony delivered by non-NCA VA witness)

Federal Register Regulations:

- June 2010 State Cemetery Grants Final Rule (Volume 75, Number 115)
- June 2009 Headstones and Marker Application Process Final Rule (Volume 74, Number 103)
- May 2009 Headstones and Markers Final Rule (Volume 74, Number 83)

Federal Register Notices:

- Jan. 2010 Allowance for Private Purchase of an Outer Burial Receptacle in Lieu of a Government-Furnished Graveliner for a Grave in a VA National Cemetery (Volume 75, Number 6)

(d) List any speeches or talks delivered by you, including commencement speeches, remarks, lectures, panel discussions, conferences, political speeches and question-and-answer sessions. Include the dates and places where such speeches or talks were given.

I give many speeches or talks in my capacity as the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, as well as in my previous positions within the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). The list below consists of speeches or talks I have identified from my recollection, from my files, and from searches of internet databases. Despite my searches, there may be other speeches or talks I have been unable to identify, find, or remember.

Presentations and Speeches

2011

- Jan. First Anniversary Awards Dinner for the Opening of Washington Crossing National Cemetery, Bristol, PA
- Jan. National Image Region III Leadership & Diversity Training Conference, Arlington, VA

2010

- Nov. Veterans Day Speaker at Tahoma National Cemetery, Kent, WA
- Nov. Second Congress on Veterans Affairs, Guaynabo, PR
- Oct. Leadership Development Mentoring Program, Washington, DC
- Oct. Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, Washington, DC
- Oct. 2nd Annual National Image Region VIII Training Conference, Denver, CO
- Oct. National Funeral Director's Association, 2010 International Convention and Expo, New Orleans, LA
- Oct. National Disability Employment Awareness Month, Washington, DC
- Sept. ADVANCE Training – Opening Remarks for Project Management, Washington, DC
- Sept. Life of an Executive – SES Candidate Development Program Executive, Annapolis, MD
- Sept. Togus Monument Rededication / Time Capsule, Togus, ME
- Sept. Leadership VA Milwaukee Session, Milwaukee, WI
- Sept. 2010 National Veterans TEE (Training, Exposure, Experience) Tournament, Iowa City, IA
- Aug. Korea International Workshop on Veterans Affairs, Seoul, Korea
- Aug. Blacks in Government (BIG) Conference, Kansas City, MO
- Aug. Wapenbroeders, Inc., Ceremony, Los Angeles, CA
- June National Veterans Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
- June Society of American Indian Government Employees, Uncasville, CT
- June American GI Forum, Santa Maria, CA
- June Southwest Veteran's Business Resource Center, Perris, CA
- May Memorial Day Ceremony at Riverside National Cemetery, Riverside, CA
- May Memorial Day Ceremony at Bakersfield National Cemetery, Bakersfield, CA
- May Bosnia Delegation on Veterans Affairs, Washington, DC
- May Reburial of Historic Remains at Florence National Cemetery, Florence, SC
- May Afghanistan Minister of Veterans Affairs, Washington, DC
- May Seminar with National Parks Service on Cemetery Operations, Petersburg, VA
- April National Image, Inc., Outreach to Veterans and Federal Employees, San Diego, CA
- April VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Houston, TX
- Mar. Arbor Day Ceremony, Long Island National Cemetery, Farmingdale, NY
- Feb. Medal of Honor Interpretative Sign Unveiling, Salisbury National Cemetery, Salisbury, NC
- Jan. Groundbreaking and Dedication of Miramar National Cemetery, San Diego, CA

2009

- Dec. League of United Latin American Citizens, Los Angeles, CA
- Dec. National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
- Nov. VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Washington, DC
- Nov. Veterans Day Ceremony at Tahoma National Cemetery, Kent, WA
- Oct. Burial Flag Presentation to Tejon Ranch, Bakersfield, CA
- Oct. 10th Anniversary of Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, Elwood, IL

Aug. Cremation Association of North America Annual Convention, Denver, CO
 Aug. American GI Forum National Convention, Corpus Christi, TX
 July Bakersfield National Cemetery, First Day of Burials, Bakersfield, CA
 July League of United Latin American Citizens San Juan, PR
 July National Employment Counseling Association Summer Professional Development
 Institute, Fairfax, VA
 June Alabama National Cemetery, First Day of Burials, Montevallo, AL
 June 30th Anniversary Ft. Snelling Memorial Rifle Squad, Oakdale, MN
 May National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 May Memorial Day Ceremony at Sacramento Valley National Cemetery, Dixon, CA
 May Memorial Day Ceremony at Social Security Administration, Baltimore, MD
 May National Image, Inc., Salute to Veterans, San Antonio, TX
 Mar. Canadian Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, Video Conference, Washington, DC
 Feb. Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, Washington, DC
 Jan. Briefing for Delegation of Japan Ministry of Defense, Washington, DC
 Jan. Sarasota National Cemetery, First Day of Burials, Sarasota, FL
 Jan. Jacksonville National Cemetery, First Day of Burials, Jacksonville, FL
 Jan. Fort Jackson National Cemetery, First Day of Burials, Columbia, SC

2008

Dec. Republic of Georgia Parliamentarians, Washington, DC
 Dec. Taiwan All Volunteer Force Delegation, Washington, DC
 Nov. Iraq Ministry of Defense Delegation, Washington, DC
 Nov. Chinese Delegation, Bureau of Veterans Affairs Ministry of Civil Affairs, Washington, DC
 Nov. VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, West Palm Beach, FL
 Nov. Veterans Day Ceremony, National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, Honolulu, HI
 Nov. VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Washington, DC
 Oct. National Veterans Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 Oct. Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, Washington, DC
 June Washington Crossing National Cemetery Public Meeting, Newtown, PA
 May Canadian Standing Committee On Veterans' Affairs, Video Conference from Washington,
 DC
 May Memorial Day Ceremony at San Joaquin Valley, National Cemetery, Santa Nella, CA
 May National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 April VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, West Palm Beach, FL

2007

Nov. Veterans Day Ceremony at Ft. Logan National Cemetery, Denver, CO
 Nov. National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 Oct. VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Washington, DC
 June National Veterans Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 May Memorial Day Ceremony at Tahoma National Cemetery, Kent, WA
 May VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Atlanta, GA
 April South Florida National Cemetery, First Day of Burials, West Palm Beach, FL
 April National Veterans Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC

2006

Nov. Veterans Day Ceremony at Natchez National Cemetery, Natchez, LA

Nov. VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Washington, DC
 Nov. Kentucky Veterans Cemetery Groundbreaking Ceremony, Williamstown, KY
 Oct. National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 Sept. Town Hall about Washington Crossing National Cemetery, Newtown, PA
 May Memorial Day Ceremony at San Joaquin National Cemetery, Santa Nella, CA
 May Memorial Day Ceremony at Golden Gate National Cemetery, Los Angeles, CA
 April National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 April VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Riverside, CA
 Mar. State Cemetery Director Training on Cemetery Operations, St. Louis, MO
 Feb. Town Hall about Washington Crossing National Cemetery, Washington Crossing Historic Park, Washington Crossing, PA

2005

Nov. Veterans Day Ceremony at San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery, Santa Nella, CA
 Nov. National Veterans Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 Nov. Veteran Recognition Program, San Diego, CA
 Nov. Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Washington, DC
 Sept. Town Hall, White Plains, NY
 June Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, St. Louis, MO
 May Memorial Day at Willamette National Cemetery, Portland, OR
 April Town Hall, Grafton, WV
 April National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC

2004

Nov. Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Washington, DC
 Nov. New Hampshire Veterans Cemetery Veterans Day Ceremony, Boscaawen, NH
 Oct. National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 Sept. Meeting organized by a group of local Veterans regarding a new national cemetery, San Diego, CA
 May Memorial Day Ceremony at Houston National Cemetery, Houston, TX
 May Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, San Francisco, CA
 June National Veterans Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 April National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 Feb. Town Hall, New Orleans, LA

2003

Nov. Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Washington, DC
 Nov. Veterans Day Ceremony at Rock Island National Cemetery, Rock Island, IL
 Oct. National Veteran Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 Oct. Meeting organized by a group of local Veterans on the Need for New National Cemetery, San Diego, CA
 Sept. National Funeral Directors Association, Las Vegas, NV
 April National Veterans Service Organizations Forum, Washington, DC
 April Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, Milwaukee, WI

(e) List all interviews you have given to newspapers, magazines or other publications, and radio or television stations (including the dates of such interviews).

The National Cemetery Administration's public affairs office does not keep records on interviews. To the best of my ability I have identified from my recollection, from my files, and from searches of internet databases, the list below. Despite my searches, there may be other speeches, interviews, or talks I have been unable to identify, find, or remember.

2011

Print/Online

V.A. expands its search area for new cemetery location, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, Feb. 16, 2011, <http://rocnw.com/article/local-news/2011102160334>

Shen Yun Evokes a Feeling of Blending With the Earth, Says Veterans Affairs Official, Epoch Times, Jan. 25, 2011, <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/49995/>

2010

Television

Interview regarding Miramar National Cemetery Dedication Ceremony, San Diego News 6, January 30, 2010

Print/Online

Miramar military cemetery opens for burials, The San Diego Union-Tribune, Nov. 22, 2010, <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/ncv/22/miramar-military-cemetery-opens-burials/>

"Dedicating His Life to Service and Honor", LaOpinion, November 21, 2010, <http://www.impre.com/laopinion/noticias/primera-pagina/2010/11/21/dedica-su-vida-al-honor-y-al-s-223559-1.html#commentsBlock>

In military cemeteries, the work serves to honor fallen comrades, Washington Post, November 10, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/10/AR2010111006984.html>

The American Veteran 611: Memorial Affairs, Interview with VA's The American Veteran online news magazine, Nov. 1, 2010

Vets burial grounds in 2011 budget, VA says, Pueblo (CO) Chieftain, Oct. 22, 2010, http://www.chieftain.com/article_e582c0f4-dd96-11df-9473-001cc4c03286.html

Monument at Togus reveals 1889 treasure, Morning Sentinel, Sept. 16, 2010, http://www.onlinesentinel.com/news/monument-reveals-1889-treasure_2010-09-15.html#

Stimulus will fund cemetery repair: Federal stimulus money will fund renovations at Culpeper National Cemetery, The Free Lance-Star, Aug. 5, 2010, <http://fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/2010/082010/08052010/565854>

Interviewed on NCA updates for Paralyzed Veterans Association's PN/Paraplegia News, July 2010

Army finds problems with IT contracts, records system at Arlington Cemetery, Washington Post, June 25, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/24/AR2010062406528.html?wprss=rss_metro&sid=ST2010061700193

What about the other national cemeteries?, Washington Post, June 11, 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/federal-eye/2010/06/what_about_the_other_national.html

Riverside motorcycle procession honors veterans, The Press-Enterprise.com, May 31, 2010, http://www.pe.com/localnews/stories/PE_News_Local_D_wmemorial01.a5b67c.html

Steve Muro, the man in charge of looking after U.S. military cemeteries, Washington Post, March 30, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/30/AR2010053003636.html>

President Obama will skip Memorial Day visit to Arlington National Cemetery, Washington Post, March 27, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/27/AR2010052702696.html>

Radio

Faith Community Veteran Outreach, KDIA 1640AM, Awakenings Church Radio Show, July 2010, Vallejo, CA

New National Cemetery At MCAS Miramar, KPBS Radio Station, May 31, 2010, <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2010/may/31/new-national-cemetery-near-mcas-miramar/>

"Overview of National Cemetery Administration", WYCB 1340AM, My Sprit, May 2010, Washington, DC

2009 and Before

Vets Cemetery sees first burials, Tehachapi (CA) News, July 2, 2009, <http://www.tehachapinews.com/ncde/18501>

Bakersfield National Cemetery Opens, KERO-TV, July 1, 2009, <http://www.turnto23.com/news/19921472/detail.html>

When duty calls: Ex-Marine sounds veterans' farewell: In Illinois, brother in arms plays taps, volunteering bugle, Los Angeles Times (carried in Boston Globe), Feb. 1, 2006, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2006/02/01/when_duty_calls_ex_marine_sounds_veterans_farewell/

GIs' Graves Get Pentagon Slogans, Associated Press, Aug. 24, 2005, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,166590,00.html>

17. Political affiliations and activities

(a) List all financial contributions to any political party or election committee during the last 10 years.

None.

(b) List all elective public offices for which you have been a candidate and the month and year of each election involved.

None.

(c) List all memberships and offices held in and services rendered, whether compensated or not, to any political party or election committee.

None.

18. Future employment relationships

(a) State whether you will sever all connections with your present employer, business firm, association, or organization if you are confirmed by the Senate.

Not applicable as I am currently serving as the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, the position to which I have been nominated.

(b) State whether you have any plans after completing Government service to resume employment, affiliation, or practice with your previous employer, business firm, association, or organization.

None.

(c) What commitments, if any, have been made to you for employment after you leave Federal service?

None.

(d) (If appointed for a term of specified duration) Do you intend to serve the full term for which you have been appointed?

Yes.

(e) (If appointed for an indefinite period) Do you intend to serve until the next Presidential election?

Yes.

19. Potential conflicts of interest

(a) Describe any financial arrangements, deferred compensation agreements, or other continuing financial, business, or professional dealings which you have with business associates, clients, or customers who will be affected by policies which you will influence in the position to which you have been nominated.

None.

(b) List any investments, obligations, liabilities, or other financial relationships which could be affected by policies which you will influence in the position to which you have been nominated.

None.

(c) Describe any business relationship, dealing, or financial transaction which you have had during the last 5 years, whether for yourself, on behalf of a client, or acting as an agent, that constitutes a potential conflict of interest with the position to which you have been nominated.

None.

(d) Describe any activity during the past 10 years in which you have engaged for the purpose of directly or indirectly influencing the passage, defeat, or modification of any legislation or affecting the administration and execution of law or public policy. Activities performed as an employee of the Federal government need not be listed.

None.

(e) Explain how you will resolve any potential conflict of interest that may be disclosed by your responses to the above items. (Please provide a copy of any trust or other agreements involved in Part II.)

Not Applicable.

20. Testifying before the Congress

(a) Do you agree to appear and testify before any duly constituted committee of the Congress upon the request of such committee?

Yes.

(b) Do you agree to provide such information as is requested by such a committee?

Yes.

[A letter from the Office of Government Ethics follows:]



Office of Government Ethics
Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, DC 20510

JAN 14 2011

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In accordance with the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, I enclose a copy of the financial disclosure report filed by Steve L. Muro, who has been nominated by President Obama for the position of Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Department of Veterans' Affairs.

We have reviewed the report and have also obtained advice from the agency concerning any possible conflict in light of its functions and the nominee's proposed duties. Also enclosed is an ethics agreement outlining the actions that the nominee will undertake to avoid conflicts of interest. Unless a date for compliance is indicated in the ethics agreement, the nominee must fully comply within three months of confirmation with any action specified in the ethics agreement.

Based thereon, we believe that this nominee is in compliance with applicable laws and regulations governing conflicts of interest.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. J. Cusick".

Robert J. Cusick
Director

Enclosures

[Letter from the nominee to the Office of Legal Counsel, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs:]

January 11, 2011

Mr. Walter A. Hall (023)
Assistant General Counsel and
Designated Agency Ethics Official
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20420

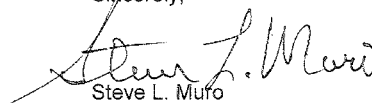
Dear Mr. Hall:

The purpose of this letter is to describe the steps that I will take to avoid any actual or apparent conflict of interest in the event that I am confirmed for the position of Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

As required by 18 U.S.C. § 208(a), I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter that has a direct and predictable effect on my financial interests or those of any person whose interests are imputed to me, unless I first obtain a written waiver, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1), or qualify for a regulatory exemption, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(2). I understand that the interests of the following persons are imputed to me: any spouse or minor child of mine; any general partner of a partnership in which I am a limited or general partner; any organization in which I serve as officer, director, trustee, general partner or employee; and any person or organization with which I am negotiating or have an arrangement concerning prospective employment.

Finally, I understand that as an appointee I am required to sign the Ethics Pledge (Exec. Order No. 13490) and that I will be bound by the requirements and restrictions therein in addition to the commitments I have made in this and any other ethics agreement.

Sincerely,



Steve L. Mufo

Chairman MURRAY. Thank you very much to both of you.

We have had a number of Committee Members come in. You have all noticed that we have new technology changes for this Committee. I am proud that this is the first Committee that is moving to a paperless Committee.

You have all the background information, and you have all of our witness information that you would normally have in a large binder in front of you.

We are happy to help any of you as you work your way through learning this; but we hope to have some great advances, that we will be able to talk to some of our witnesses using these; and when charts and graphs come up, we will have them in front of us. I encourage all of you to take advantage of this.

With that, I am going to begin my questions to both of our witnesses. As everyone knows, the Congress and the President are trying to find a path forward on the budget today; I want to ask both of you to help me address the concern that benefits and services may be affected by a government shutdown.

I understand there is some reticence to discuss this issue, but as Chairman of this Committee, I need assurances that our veterans will continue to receive vital services and payments that they have earned.

Mr. Muro, I wanted to ask you: would services be affected at the National Cemetery Administration? Most importantly, would burials still take place during a shutdown?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for that question, Chairman Murray.

Burials will continue at national cemeteries.

Chairman MURRAY. They will?

Mr. MURO. Yes.

Chairman MURRAY. General Hickey, have you received any information on what would be happening at VBA? I really want to avoid what happened during the last shutdown when veterans received checks late and some services were curtailed. Have you received any information yet?

General HICKEY. Chairman Murray, thank you for the question. I am not privy to any of the information and discussions at VBA on these issues.

Chairman MURRAY. OK. All right. Well, I appreciate it. These are concerns that all of us as Members have and I think we are all working very hard to try to come a resolution so that we do not need to worry about that. But I think it is important that we do understand that. So I will be pursuing those questions with others before this week is over.

Mr. Muro, let me start with you. We talked briefly about Arlington National Cemetery when you and I had a chance to meet last week, but I want to get this issue on the record so that we can offer our veterans some peace of mind.

We know now that the problems with misidentification of remains at Arlington may be worse than was originally thought. Arlington is obviously not run by the VA and, therefore, will not be yours to oversee.

However, VA cemeteries are national shrines and are so important to our veterans and their survivors. I wanted to ask you today what safeguards are in place to keep what happened at Arlington from happening at our VA national cemeteries.

Mr. MURO. Thank you, Chairman Murray.

Within the National Cemetery Administration, we have our burial operation system that tracks all burials from the time we take the application to the time we set the headstone. We keep burial records electronically.

We also have procedures for tracking when the individual is brought to the cemetery. We have the service. We document every step of the burial process to ensure they are placed in their proper gravesite and that the headstone is also placed on the proper gravesite.

Chairman MURRAY. Are you helping Arlington with this matter at this point?

Mr. MURO. Yes, we are. The new superintendent of Arlington National Cemetery, Pat Hallinan, was a 30-year career NCA individual that came up through the ranks, became a cemetery director, moved on as Director of Field Operations, and now is over at Arlington.

We have also sent over other employees on details to assist him, and we provide copies of our operational policies and guidance to help them move forward, and we are also working to assist them with their electronic systems.

Chairman MURRAY. Do you think that Arlington should be realigned to fall under the NCA?

Mr. MURO. I think that we ought give the new team at Arlington the opportunity to address the issues that are there so that the Nation's veterans and those in uniform will feel good about Arlington again.

Chairman MURRAY. General Hickey, as Under Secretary, you are going to need to keep a handle on who is receiving bonuses at VBA and why. Last year, of those VBA executives who received bonuses, the average was more than \$17,000.

How would you justify to veterans that at a time when they are going to be waiting on average nearly 200 days to get a decision that a bonus should be given to some VBA executives?

General HICKEY. Chairman Murray, thank you for your question. I will just tell you I have not been briefed on the bonus situation at VA other than to understand that bonuses are focused on performance if they are awarded, and I am just not aware of the level of bonuses that have been distributed inside of VBA. But if confirmed, I look forward to learning not only about the entire performance structure and how we reward people for good performance in service delivery of benefits, but also the entire human resources structure as well.

Chairman MURRAY. OK. We will look forward to that and watch very closely with you.

General, I know I do not need to tell you how vitally important education benefits are to our veterans, especially those that are trying to transition from the military into the civilian world.

I am hearing a lot from veterans today about the cap on private universities as well as the stop in the payments for breaks between semesters. Veterans are telling me they are very concerned that when this stop happens, they will not be able to pay their rent and will end up dropping out.

I am going to be introducing legislation very soon to fix this problem. I hope to be working with Senator Burr on this. It is, I think, very important that we take a look at this and address it.

Will you commit to working with us on those fixes?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Chairman Murray, for your question.

First, let me start by thanking the entire Committee, specifically Senator Akaka, Senator Webb, and the rest of the Committee for your hard work on what is known and seen by veterans across the Nation as an extraordinarily positive benefit, not only for themselves but the ability for them to use it with their families, if necessary, as well as the benefit that it will afford the Nation by offering this benefit to our veterans.

So thank you very much for that.

I will say that I know and have been briefed that VBA right now is conducting a very major outreach effort to all of the students who are impacted by the changes in the second legislation, and they are making a strong effort to give them as much advanced warning as possible.

If confirmed, I absolutely look forward to seeing your legislation and commenting on that legislation in that respect but also look forward to learning other ways that we might be able to assist in this matter.

Chairman MURRAY. OK. I appreciate that. One more question for you then I will turn it over to Senator Isakson.

General Hickey, if you are confirmed, you are going to have one of the toughest jobs at the VA. You are going to be facing nearly a million pending claims and a massive amount of paper.

I cannot underscore enough the level of frustration that veterans have with the claims backlog today. I talked about it in my opening statement.

It takes 190 days to process a claim right now, and we know the situation is getting worse. VA is now predicting it will take 230 days to process a claim in 2012, in part due to the recent decision on Agent Orange claims.

When we met last week, I asked that you provide the Committee with a plan within the first 45 days on the job on how you intend to cut the amount of time it takes to give a veteran a correct answer on a claim, and I want to put that in the record today.

Are you willing to work and provide this Committee with a plan within the first 45 days?

General HICKEY. Chairman Murray, thank you very much for your question. And you are right. It is a very big and complex problem. We have, from my perspective, the very best situation, which is a senior-leader environment under Secretary Shinseki's guidance. His really strong staff focused on the solutions, not just a single way to come at this problem, but multiple ways to come at this problem by pulling apart the processes and taking out the waste and the delays and the cost of poor quality and streamlining those processes by working with the workforce to prepare them for this change and to train them with good standard operating procedures and also to bring on new technology with the veterans benefits management system that will facilitate and enable them to do these claims in a more efficient and effective way with broad-based capability within it that allows that decision and that adjudication to be made faster, better, and more responsive to our veterans who are in need.

Yes, ma'am, you have asked me for a 45-day plan. If confirmed, I am committed to delivering that plan to you and talking to you about that.

Chairman MURRAY. OK. Good. I would also ask you if you could send a training team out to Seattle. When I went out there and my staff went out there over the last recess, we found a significant number of problems. I would like to work with you to get somebody out there to help do some training. If you could work with me on that.

General HICKEY. Chairman Murray, one of my major focuses in all of quality management is to resolve issues right up front in a process and that begins with a major focus on training. I can commit to you that, if confirmed, my focus on training will be paramount in working with the workforce and others to ensure that we are providing that in consumable, appropriate ways and that it is a focus on quality throughout the process throughout their careers to ensure that we are delivering on that.

Chairman MURRAY. Thank you very much.

Senator Isakson.

Senator ISAKSON. Thank you, Chairman Murray.

I want to apologize to both Members that I am going to have to leave. I have someone waiting for me in my office that I have to attend to.

But before I do, I want to say two things. One is Chairman Murray is absolutely correct on what the one focus of your job is going to be, General Hickey, and the claims problem that we have got here has to be solved. I will pledge to you any support that I can give to help you in accomplishing that. I think that is the number 1 task.

Second, some veterans' benefits are delivered by third parties. When we met, I discussed with you the issue of VA refinances on the VA home loan benefit.

As you know, we discovered in Georgia that veterans were being overcharged on closing fees on VA refinances by some lenders. It was brought to my attention by an attorney who represented some veterans.

I want to commend the Administration. When I brought it to their attention, they immediately began investigating it, confronted the lenders that had moved the charge around. And we have gotten refunds over \$10 million to our veterans which I think is to the credit of the Administration.

But it does point out how we should be observant of those third parties who are delivering, in part or in whole, benefits to our veterans which you will be in charge of.

And with the permission of the Chairman, at some point in time after the first 45 days, we would like to have a hearing on the VA home loan program to make sure that those services are being delivered appropriately to our veterans, and I will call on you at the time at that hearing to do so.

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Isakson, for your question on the loan guarantee program.

And I, from the exposure I have had thus far, would say that one of our highest veteran satisfaction areas is in our home loan program, where they take very seriously the responsibility to ensure that a veteran remains in their home and their families remain in their home.

I know that they have some rather significant checks and balances in the process as they work with the mortgage providers and lenders and that they take very quick action. I thank you for the comment on their response. They take very quick action when they find a process that is not appropriate, in support of those veterans and advocating for those veterans.

If confirmed, sir, I look forward to learning more about this particular area in relation to those checks and balances.

Senator ISAKSON. Thank you very much and thanks to you both for your service.

Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Chairman MURRAY. Thank you.

Senator TESTER.

Senator TESTER. Thank you, Madam Chair.

General Hickey, I will start with you, and first of all, I will preface this by saying thanks to the both of you for coming to my office and having a nice visit.

The Chairman asked you a question about the backlogs. In your testimony, you said it was a central focus of your job coming in, and you laid down some ideas with the answer to the Chairman's question.

Have you thought about or do you consider working with VSOs. Can the VSOs play a role in this backlog issue? Have you thought about that? And if so, what role could they play, if any?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Tester, for your question and also for our visit.

If confirmed, my focus with VSOs would be a very strong partnership. I think they already do provide services in this area today, and so I would look forward to continuing that relationship with the VSOs as they assist many veterans in the preparations of their fully developed claims and other areas associated with their benefits options and choices.

So my particular approach would be to be very engaged with VSOs and to look for any opportunity where we could partner together to make a difference in our veterans' lives.

Senator TESTER. OK. Do you have any—and I know you are supposed to know the answer to a question before you ask it, but do you have any idea what percentage of veterans do not take advantage of the VA system?

General HICKEY. Senator Tester, I am not going to guess at that number. I will just say that I know that of the 23 million veterans that we serve in general, about 8 million of those veterans, from the numbers I have received in open-source environments.

Senator TESTER. Eight million take advantage of it, and so we have about 15 million or so that do not.

General HICKEY. Sir, I say those are the numbers that I have seen.

Senator TESTER. OK. Is there anything we can do about that? I mean, we have veterans out there who have earned benefits, I guess maybe they are not buying what we are offering. Is there anything we can do about that?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Tester, for your follow-up. I know that VBA, in particular, from a benefits perspective is pushing very hard in outreach. In fact, my understanding is that VBA has established the Benefits Assistance Service in an effort to do exactly that which is outreach to the many veterans that have served so well our Nation so well.

Senator TESTER. Any idea on how effective that has been?

General HICKEY. Sir, my understanding is that it is fairly recent. But I will say that one of the major efforts that I have actually

seen myself as a veteran is the e-benefits site where they can literally take advantage of self-service options to potentially pull their DD-214 and have it on the spot, to look up some of the other benefits they are entitled to, and see what the status of that is, even to access their payment history for things like their schools.

Senator TESTER. Part of that outreach hopefully will be focused on rural America, where we have a lot of veterans, whether you are talking about Montana or Alaska or any other rural State—we have a ton of them.

We talked about the GI overpayment issue and whether it is a, for whatever reason, clerical error, cumbersome process, whatever it might be. Currently, if the VA overpays a person it really puts the veteran in a bind. And I am talking about if they are going to school particularly. We talked about that in my office.

Have you had a chance to consider this issue at all to look for any remedies, and if so, what would they be?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Tester, for that question. I support the Secretary's position that the student needs to be focused on their education and completing that education and not worrying about the financial situations associated with that education.

What I can tell you is that the outreach effort is out there but it is also inclusive of a willingness and the leaning-forward nature of VBA to work with that student to, if necessary, readjust payment options and anything that might be more facilitative to the student to really focus on their schoolwork and not on this issue.

Senator TESTER. That is great. Is there any effort going to be put toward the people who are on campus that are administrating these programs?

General HICKEY. Sir, my understanding is that currently there are relationships with schools and with the education business line and that a focus for them is to build those partnerships and relationships and to communicate with them so that they are understanding what the issues are and who their students are.

Senator TESTER. When you get confirmed and you get into this position and you do the outreach, I think those people on the campuses can be a tremendous resource for you as you move forward to solve this problem because they have been a tremendous resource for me, quite frankly.

Just in closing real quick, I would just say that, Steve, I want to keep on your radar screen the Yellowstone cemetery. It is a big deal for veterans across Montana, northern Wyoming, and hopefully we can get that settled as soon as you are confirmed if not before.

So thank you.

Mr. MURO. Thank you.

Chairman MURRAY. Senator Moran.

Senator MORAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

General Hickey, I have heard from VA officials for a long time about the number 1 priority that you plan to address is the backlog.

What makes this different? What do you intend to do differently considering what we have heard over a long period of time about solving this issue?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Moran, for your question. I would start by first acknowledging the really hard work that has been done by the VBA staff. Yes, in fact, there was 1.2 million claims in the door in 2010, but they have also reached record heights in completing a million claims in 2010, and so I thank again this Committee for providing the resources that allow them to do that.

What I would say the difference now that perhaps did not exist for my predecessors in this position is the culmination of first and foremost, a OneVA approach to this challenge.

I think in the past it may have been seen as a VBA issue so VBA needs to go solve it. But under this Secretary's leadership and under the leadership of Deputy Secretary Gould and the colleagues in VHA and even the National Cemetery Administration, I think that the focus of this issue now being seen as a OneVA effort is first and foremost, an opportunity.

Second, the fact that the process has been unpacked very diligently, like never before, really looked at hard, and then brought back together in a way that shapes the business rules for the veterans benefit management system is a second. So a real strong focus on the process.

Third, frankly, the VBMS system itself will move VBA from a paper-bound process, as you well described and I have actually seen—pictures with mountains of papers that barely leave desk space for our hardworking VBA employees—I think that VBMS system and my experience using systems like that in my day job today, is a significant way forward. When you combine that with the process. But critical to that will be the preparation of the people, training them to use that system, getting to a standard operating procedure and training methods to prepare them for VBMS.

I think that creates an opportunity that has not existed before.

Senator MORAN. If I understand your answer correctly, in large part this is the culmination. We have been working a long time on getting the backlog under control. The Secretary is clearly emphasizing the importance of the entire VA but because of the progress that has been made to date, we are now in a position to make significant progress and the backlog greatly diminished. Is that accurate?

General HICKEY. Senator Moran, thank you for the follow-up. I will say that it is very much the goal the Secretary has established in his strategic plan, and I am a strategic planner by trade so I value the guidance provided which is to have no veteran wait more than 125 days for a good-quality decision at a 98 percent accuracy rate.

Senator MORAN. What it is in your experience at Accenture that lends itself to the leadership necessary to accomplish this goal?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Moran, for allowing me to tell a little bit about that side of my life. I will say that one of my roles was to do the requirements development for a Federal agency in customer-relation management and call-center practices.

So while certainly I am not an "Xs and Os" code developer of any kind, and never claimed to be, I really did see the value associated with large throughput of transactions, how you triage that, how a system allows you to communicate with your customer more effec-

tively in whatever means they choose to do with you, whether it was fax or phone or email or app or iPad, in your example.

Also my understanding is that combined with what I do today in program management where I oversee a team that does all of the transactional H.R. services for another Federal client, seeing how it does not matter, it is not personality or person-dependent or even desk-dependent, when we push our work through a system. Any qualified individual can work on that same file knowing all the data and all the work that has been done before and there is good accountability in that process, and it reduces the burden of the paper flow issues that are created as well.

So that would be the two major things. And the third, frankly, is the program management experience that I have. So working toward deadlines and timelines and achieving what we promise and what we committed to in the inception of the program.

Senator MORAN. General, thank you very much.

If confirmed, I look forward to helping you reach that goal on behalf of the veterans of Kansas and the country.

Mr. Muro, we have three national cemeteries and four State cemeteries in Kansas. I think at some point in time we need to talk about some expansion but I appreciate and just would acknowledge your rise within the organization and it is pleasing to me that there are those opportunities for people to begin as a mechanic and end up as the Under Secretary.

If confirmed, I offer my congratulations to you on that success in your personal life.

Madam Chairman, thank you very much.

Mr. MURO. Thank you.

Chairman MURRAY. Senator Begich.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MARK BEGICH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA**

Senator BEGICH. First, congratulations to both of you for being nominated, and I appreciate your being here today.

Let me, if I can, ask a couple of questions. First, General Hickey, last year I held a field hearing in Alaska regarding the VA and IG report that was published, and it was published in 2009. I am not sure if you are familiar with it but I am not expecting you to be specifically.

But in that report basically said the Anchorage office did not meet the VA requirements in thirteen of the fourteen regional areas, and it kind of had a shopping list of issues. They have been working through it.

But one of the big issues, and I was just intrigued by your conversation here about customer service and some of those elements that you are familiar with is the relationship and confidence in the system because when you get a strong IG report obviously there is a lack of faith that things will get done.

And as they start to get done, the question is how do you get that information out to people so that they feel more confident in the system as these changes are being done.

First, let me ask you: are you familiar with the report? I am not expecting you to be.

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Begich, for your questions. I have not read the report but I understand at a very high level the issue.

Senator BEGICH. Do you think when there are reports like this, and I would be interested in your feedback, and I am assuming positive confirmation, on the report and kind of the status of how to deal with the relationship and getting the confidence level higher with the VA regarding the outcome of the work they have been doing based on that report.

Give me some thoughts as to how you might address that.

General HICKEY. Thank you, sir, for the follow-up. I will start by saying it is my understanding that the issues raised in the IG report have been closed, resolved and closed.

Senator BEGICH. Right.

General HICKEY. So my other experience, frankly from a military perspective where we did a great number of inspections and reviews through IG assessments and evaluations, is that and I do not know how the IG works within the VA, but I would assume there were some similar interactions between IGs.

As to the first issue, no matter who we are working with in our VBA environment, there are appropriate standards, and those standards are assessed. I do know that the VBA or the VA IG do periodic assessments through a sampling of the different offices to assess performance.

I believe in assessing performance. I have lived in an environment where assessing performance validates that you are on the right track and that you are going in the right direction and that you do not need additional assistance.

I do not necessarily think sometimes that finding something in a performance assessment from an IG perspective is a bad thing. It highlights it. It lets us put resources and appropriate training or appropriate adjustments to the process to fix it and resolve it and move forward.

And aside from that, I would just simply say communication for me regardless of the topic is very vital. Outreach is very vital. If confirmed, I am committed to getting the word out as often and as frequently—seven times seven different ways, if necessary—to communicate.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Let me go onto another issue. A couple of weeks ago I held a meeting with many of the Federal agencies, kind of an interagency group on homelessness.

And the veteran population is growing fairly dramatic especially in rural areas. Senator Tester talked about rural Montana. Rural Alaska is even more rural than Montana. We always joke about that, he and I.

Tell me, what are your thoughts on how to ensure that the veteran homeless population access the VA in areas that are remote in Alaska?

And how would you reach out to the rural communities, especially in getting benefits to the rural homeless that is clearly growing? There is no question about it in Alaska. You see it.

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Begich, for your question and for your concern for those veterans who are really struggling

without a roof over their head and perhaps many other benefits associated with that as well.

I will just start my comments by saying that particular issue, I know, is a significant one to the Secretary and to VA at this point in time and is, frankly, one of the issues that drew my interest to this position—finding a way to meet the needs of our homeless veterans.

So if confirmed, I look forward to exploring with VBA and with the offices in VA who have that charge to tackle that issue, on ways in which VBA can assist in providing methods to provide benefits to our homeless veterans. I know that they do that today.

Senator BEGICH. Assuming you get confirmed, my time is expired, but I would love to invite you to Alaska, and obviously at whatever time, to kind of visit some of the rural areas so that you get kind of that sense of the struggles we have there in trying to meet those services.

General HICKEY. Thank you very much, Senator Begich. I have had the wonderful opportunity in my Air Force career to make two great trips to Alaska and spent quite a bit of time up there, one in the dead of winter and one in the glorious all-day sunshine.

So I would look forward to visiting with you.

Senator BEGICH. You get extra points for being there in the winter. That is a plus up. You have great enthusiasm. I think it is exciting. Do not let the system beat you down because I think that enthusiasm you have is going to be a huge plus to the VA.

General HICKEY. Thank you very much, Senator, and I will work my best to not let that happen.

Chairman MURRAY. Thank you.

Senator Brown.

**STATEMENT OF HON. SCOTT P. BROWN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MASSACHUSETTS**

Senator BROWN OF MASSACHUSETTS. Thank you, Madam Chair. First of all, thank you for holding the hearing and obviously congratulations to both of you.

General, starting with you, you mentioned your private-sector experiences providing knowledge on building, retaining a quality workforce, and then customer relationship management especially. What lessons do you think you could apply from the private sector to these areas, to the areas that we have been talking about, if you are confirmed?

General HICKEY. Thank you very much, Senator Brown, for your question and also for your continued service in the National Guard.

I have a long history with the National Guard, and it is a very proud one so I especially appreciate what you do for your State as well in that regard.

So, my experience with industry has been very remarkable. I will be honest in saying it was not my experience in the military. Learning the way that industry uses technology, combined with processes, how it prepares the workforce to be really comfortable in that method was new to me.

So I have just been very eager in understanding all that industry has learned about leveraging IT; but specifically I will say that, in

application to this role, I have learned that you do not just throw IT in an organization and expect that to be successful.

I have learned that you need to prepare with good change management, with good communication, with good training plans in advance of an IT system integration in that you need to also, in conjunction with that IT, make sure that it is capturing the best and right process.

And if you are doing that in an agile way, meaning you are willing and flexible to improve upon that over time, then you really can continue to improve a process and really drive efficiencies even higher.

The last thing I will say: I have always been a focused person on data and analytics but even more heightened in my experience in industry and I will drive my decisions not exclusively on data and analytics but heavily looking for data to drive decisions.

Senator BROWN OF MASSACHUSETTS. Indeed, it is certainly important, but what I found and I think everybody who is here in Congress has found that the lack of personal attention to soldiers' claims is the driving force. They feel neglected. They get lost in the quagmire of paperwork and statistics and the like.

Have you given any thought to actually working in teams and having one team start and then finish the claim and doing it in a more potentially timely and personable way?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Brown, for your follow-up question. It is my understanding, and I look forward to confirming this, that our VBA workforce takes every one of those applications and sees it not as a piece of paper or as a number or as a statistic, but as a deserving veteran who deserves their care and compassion. Everyday they get up and come to work to do that.

I would offer to you that we will continue to encourage personal relationships with those that they serve in VBA. But also, as I have been throughout my career, always open to ideas that would help us to operate better and more efficiently.

I have, in my experience, both in the Air Force and in my current industry experience, worked on matrix teams and learned that sometimes to tackle big problems you have to look at the way in which you work together to expedite things.

So if confirmed, I look forward to having more discussions and understanding how VBA operates today and its teaming structure.

Senator BROWN OF MASSACHUSETTS. I would suggest putting everybody in a room and have them then take a file and go from "A" to "Z" within the confines of that room and just solving a problem and banging out that workload.

I think everyone here will agree, that is the number 1 issue I get phone calls on in Massachusetts. We have a big wall in our office of claims that we have settled and it is through really unorthodox manners that we, in fact, have to do it.

Fortunately, they are in the same building, and we are able to go down and look them eye to eye but not for that, my gosh, I cannot even imagine. I would ask you to focus on that.

I am going to shift gears, sir. How has the National Cemetery been able to avoid some of the mistakes that plague the Arlington Cemetery?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for that question, Senator Brown.

I believe it is our culture of accountability and training of our employees plus the responsibility to report any type of situation that may occur up the chain of command to ensure that the families of the funeral homes be notified if something does occur. We do not hide anything we do. We are up front. We train our employees to ensure everyone understands that the responsibility of maintaining our cemeteries as national shrines and providing dignified burials for veterans and their family is the most important part of our job.

Senator BROWN OF MASSACHUSETTS. I do know when Senator McCaskill and I had a hearing, we actually discovered a lot of what was going on and we filed legislation that passed in a bipartisan, bicameral manner. So we have tried to track those particular issues.

How do you plan on recruiting the right people, continuing to recruit the right people to continue with your mission?

Mr. MURO. Well, one of the things that we do, and if confirmed will continue to improve on—hiring veterans is a strong way for us to continue quality service and also going to the colleges to bring people in at different levels and different programs like the SCEP programs where we can train them and promote them so that they understand the culture of the National Cemetery Administration.

Senator BROWN OF MASSACHUSETTS. Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Chairman MURRAY. Senator Webb.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JIM WEBB,
U.S. SENATOR FROM VIRGINIA**

Senator WEBB. Thank you, Chairman Murray.

This is my first opportunity to congratulate you on having taken over the chair. I am very pleased to be remaining on the Committee with you.

I would like to thank both of you for having come by my office and we had, I think, pretty extensive conversations on areas that I feel are of particular concern.

General Hickey, I think this whole area of seamless transition as it applies to the disability evaluation system is something we really need to get better coordination with between DOD and VBA, and I am pretty comfortable with the conversation we had on that.

Both of you have, I think, the types of careers that should really commend you to the positions that you are going to undertake.

I have to say that I am extremely impressed with Mr. Muro's journey. I think you probably know where all the nooks and crannies of the system are. I will resist the pun that usually comes along with that.

But I have one area that I want to make sure, for the record, that we are clear on with respect to the concern of my office. Mr. Muro, yours is the only office in government where I think this still has relevance, but I assume that you would agree that it is the position of the VA that Confederate soldiers have the same status as Union soldiers when it comes to memorial affairs, from the Civil War.

Mr. MURO. Thank you, Senator Webb. I think that all of those who served our Nation and the responsibilities we have to ensure

that they are properly memorialized is important to the VA and the National Cemetery Administration.

Senator WEBB. So in terms of legal status at this point in our history, Confederate soldiers and Union soldiers have the same legal status?

Mr. MURO. They do have the same legal status as the Union soldiers and we provide them memorialization in the same manner, depending on the location of their burials.

Senator WEBB. This is not an idle question, as you know. We are coming up on a period here with the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. This was not always the truth. This was not always the case with the Federal Government, particularly in the area of, well, actually after the Civil War in a number of areas but during the past century, particularly in the area of memorial affairs, how our Confederate soldiers were remembered, and there is a tremendous amount of misunderstanding, I think, in this country about the reasons that people served during the Civil War.

We can take the political questions aside. You and I served during the Vietnam era. We know the difference between political questions and actual service.

But when you look back at that era—a lot of people forget this—that only 5 percent of whites in the South owned slaves and only 25 percent had anything to do economically with the system. That is from John Hope Franklin, the most eminent African-American historian of the last century.

Yet one out of every three white southern males between ages 18 and 40 died in the Civil War, and it has taken a great deal of effort to have them properly memorialized.

I view this not only personally because of my own family journey but because we up here are the stewards of the service for those who came before us. Just as people are someday going to memorialize what you and I did during the Vietnam era.

With that in mind, I raise the issue of the cemetery in Richmond which we have had correspondence on, the Oakwood Cemetery, where, depending upon who is counting, there are about 14,000 Confederate soldiers buried.

I had a long discussion on this. The question seems to be the statutory interpretation of what it means to have a marked grave. What we are trying to do, as you know, with the support of the Virginia government and the city of Richmond, is to get upright markers where we can actually have names on these markers.

I know the position that we received from the VA when we asked this question was that because these graves were marked in some way with these flat, numbered markers that that constitutes a marking by law.

Let me ask you: is that interpretation from the general counsel at the DVA or is that legal interpretation from your office? Do you know?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for the question, Senator Webb. It was guidance from the legal counsel in VA in reference to the interpretation of what is considered a marked grave whether in a national cemetery or private cemetery.

Senator WEBB. So this was legal advice but not a legal opinion from general counsel?

Mr. MURO. It was legal guidance provided to us that the graves are considered marked because of the historical fact that the women's organization responsible for determining the type of markers they wanted to mark the graves, came to the conclusion that the square blocks with the numbers was the way they wanted to mark those graves.

Senator WEBB. And as we discussed the other day, one of the reasons was that private citizens were having to pay for the markers at that point in 1905 or whenever that was. Is that correct?

Mr. MURO. That is what we assume why they decided to buy those particular markers. They followed the footsteps of other cemeteries that used a similar marker.

Senator WEBB. If you read the statute, what we are talking about here is headstones or markers being provided at the expense of the United States which is the traditional policy.

Mr. MURO. That is our policy today. We do provide them today.

Senator WEBB. We may want to continue the discussion. I hope you can find some sort of resolution here that will honor these people.

Mr. MURO. We look forward to working with you and your staff, Senator.

Senator WEBB. Thank you.

Chairman MURRAY. Thank you very much.

General Hickey, let me turn back to you. Right now, we have a situation where modern medicine is not reflected in how disabilities are rated. My staff uncovered a case recently where a veteran was prescribed a very dangerous drug to treat a disability identified as cancer by the National Cancer Institute. Yet the veteran was rated at zero percent and received no compensation for his cancer.

Are you committed to fixing the rating schedule?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Chairman Murray.

It is my understanding, from the discussions that I have had to date, that there currently is an ongoing effort to update the rating schedules for VA and that is being done in conjunction with both the internal VHA experts but also medical experts outside of VA, and I think and believe that even some of our experts in VSOs are participating at some level as well.

So, if confirmed, I look forward to learning more about that VA schedule process and to being part of the process that is required from VBA's perspective.

Chairman MURRAY. Thank you. We have talked about several times today the VBA moving from this paper system into one that uses technology to help speed up work and improve the final decision.

I have seen some of these claims you mentioned. You have seen photos. Where do you begin in taking these massive files of paperwork and distilling them down to something that works in a paperless environment?

General HICKEY. Thank you, Chairman Murray, for the question. I think I begin by, if confirmed, seeing how the process works both in the unpacking of process effort that was done by the Secretary but also getting my feet on the ground and my sleeves rolled up and out with the workforce, seeing and hearing how they do their work every single day and the barriers to that work.

So I would start there. Then I would also focus in on and learn in much more detail what the technology will do for VBA and for the benefits distribution in the big picture view. I would like, if confirmed, to really get down into the capabilities and requirements that they are building those systems to and understand that and how they correlate with the processes that have been described.

So I would need to defer until, if confirmed, to make a good assessment and provide you a better answer on where to start because I think inherent is the understanding of the process, the people, and the preparation of those people and the technology and how that all comes together.

Chairman MURRAY. I do not need to tell you it is not going to be easy, but it has to be done so I look forward to hearing from you once you are confirmed, and have actually seen some of these files like I have how we are going to move from a file that is mass paper to something that is doable for literally thousands and thousands of claims.

General HICKEY. Chairman Murray, I might just add my personal experience, my current experience with the program that I work at right now in my company. We actually have converted Federal agency official personnel files and have done that through a very major scanning project effort.

It takes a bit of time to do, but with the right kinds of high-speed technology enhancements or things of that nature there are things that can be done to tackle those issues, at least from my external perspective.

Certainly, that is not from my internal VBA perspective. I am not privy to those kinds of operations that exist today.

Chairman MURRAY. Thank you.

Mr. Muro, let me turn to you. I think we need to continually re-evaluate the burial needs of our veterans, and I know that the VA already has begun this process.

According to the President's budget request to us, the VA is establishing an urban initiative to provide enhanced service to densely populated areas like Los Angeles, San Francisco, or New York.

Can you describe to us this initiative and any others that you think will help the burial needs of our veterans?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for that question, Chairman Murray.

The urban initiative will actually be columbaria-only cemeteries. That is for cremated remains niches in the urban areas, Los Angeles, San Francisco Bay area, Chicago, New York. That is a start.

We got results from the annual surveys we do with our customers and they are telling us they would come more if cemeteries could be closer; and with the increase of cremation in the United States, we are looking at building the columbaria-only cemeteries to provide closer service to those veterans that live in urban areas.

In the reference to rural America, the Secretary has charged all of VA to improve access to those veterans that live in rural America. And NCA is looking into that now. And if confirmed, I will ensure that we provide some kind of a burial option for those veterans in rural America.

Chairman MURRAY. OK. We look forward to hearing more on that.

One more question for you. You have worked your way up through the National Cemetery Administration and served the past 2 years as the Acting Under Secretary. So you are intimately familiar with our national cemeteries.

You stated in the pre-hearing questions that, if confirmed, you would pursue even greater levels of service and satisfaction to meet our solemn obligation to maintain our VA cemeteries as national shrines unlike what has occurred in Arlington.

Can you talk for a minute about what your plans are to achieve higher levels of service and satisfaction, and most importantly, how you will measure your success?

Mr. MURO. Thank you for that question, Chairman Murray.

One of the ways we are doing that is that we are actually looking at our surveys, not only the surveys we conduct annually through a contract but also through Michigan University, the survey they do.

And we are looking at those cemeteries that have high scores, 97, 98, 99 in customer service, and we are actually benchmarking them. We have gone out and done studies at those cemeteries to see what it is that they are doing that has rated such a high score.

One of my concerns is that 5 to 6 percent of the veteran population did not give us a high score. For example, my lowest scored cemetery is 84. That is not a low score, but that is not an acceptable score.

So we are looking at what can we do, what are the cemeteries at the top doing, how can we instill these best practices at the other cemeteries. The National Training Center is one of the ways we are doing this.

We just kicked off a new training class for our caretakers. It is cemetery caretaker training that teaches them all aspects of cemetery operations. So all new caretakers coming in will go through it.

My goal is to have all our caretakers that are on the roles right now which is close to 800 attend one of the classes within the next 24 months so that we can certify that all of those individuals have been trained in all aspects of their job.

Chairman MURRAY. OK. Thank you very much.

Senator Begich, do you have any additional questions?

Senator BEGICH. Just a couple of quick ones.

General, regarding the paperless system you are going to which I think is great, I just want to put one cautionary note from a customer coming in, for example, in Alaska especially our rural communities, it will take 30 minutes to download a 1040-EZ form because we have the slowest speeds in the country when it comes to high-speed broadband.

So I just want to give you a caution. For example, a lot of our communities now in rural Alaska, to fill out grant applications and so forth, that is now down almost 48 percent because they just do not have the broadband capacity.

So as you think about your internal system and how you use that to connect with your customer, people filing the claims, keep in mind that some areas may be connected but not have the speed to do it appropriately.

Just imagine a 1040-EZ form. I mean we are going to get a lot of calls these next 2 weeks, I know it already, thank you, April

15th is right around the corner. So I just want to give you that cautionary note as you do this work.

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Begich. If confirmed, I will certainly keep our rural veterans and those who are not in close proximity to bandwidth capabilities in mind as we work through this issue.

Senator BEGICH. Again, it is not that they will not necessarily be connected. It is just the speed, and that is the big problem.

The other thing, I just want to point this out, something I hope you look at. I know within our Anchorage office there seems to be brokering out some of the claims to, I think it is Montana and Salt Lake City.

That tells me there is a volume issue or staffing issue. We have lots being shipped out. The problem, of course, is that is 2,000 miles away from us.

So as you again get confirmed, could you look at that and give my office some feedback on what you see as the challenge there and why so many are being brokered out to outside of Alaska.

Again, that just tells me there is a staffing issue here or some sort of systematic problem.

General HICKEY. Thank you, Senator Begich, for your question. My answer would be, if confirmed, to look at that more specifically from an Alaska perspective but I do not have that level of specificity right now.

Senator BEGICH. Great.

General HICKEY. I would say that the overall objective for VBA when it comes to claims adjudication is to get to no veteran waiting over 125 days and a 98 percent accuracy rate.

I think if we can get there leveraging new processes, a good workforce well-trained in the new systems and a new technology approach, then I think no matter where you live you will be a satisfied veteran, and we will work hard to consider the needs of our rural vets in that respect.

Senator BEGICH. Fantastic.

The last thing, Mr. Muro, I know you are probably aware of this, but in Alaska we have two cemeteries, one in Sitka and one in Anchorage.

The one problem with that is there is a lot of our northern region that is not connected really to Anchorage or Sitka so we are looking at a new facility in Fairbanks, and I do not know if you have already started some discussions in your current role with the State of Alaska.

So I am curious. I wonder if you are aware of that or if you have started any discussions that you want to share or will put this on your list to kind of keep in mind.

Mr. MURO. Thank you for that question, Senator Begich.

Yes, I am. I work closely with Frank Salvas, our director of the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program. I know that the cemetery is on the list and he is working closely with the State to ensure we get a cemetery up there in Fairbanks.

Senator BEGICH. Great. I know they are looking at the sites right now and trying to determine that. I just wanted to make sure you have that kind of on your radar. It is great to have Sitka. That takes care of southeast. Anchorage kind of takes south central.

But we have another large military population, as you know, in the Fairbanks interior regions, and Fairbanks would be, obviously, an appropriate place.

So thank you very much.

Mr. MURO. You are welcome.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you, Madam Chair. I have no other questions.

Chairman MURRAY. All right.

Thank you very much, General Hickey, Mr. Muro, for your full and open participation in today's hearing.

Every organization needs a leader, and I am anxious to have permanent leadership at the top of both the VBA and the NCA. The VBA in particular is facing some real issues. We talked about a lot of them today that have to be addressed by permanent leadership as soon as possible.

Before I adjourn the hearing, I do want to acknowledge Mike Walcoff, who has been at the helm of the VBA for over a year now as the Acting Under Secretary for Benefits. Mike knows what a tough job both General Hickey and Mr. Muro have in store for them. And he is in the audience today to lend them his support.

Mr. Walcoff, if you want to stand, I just want to thank you for your service. I appreciate all you have done. [Applause.]

I would ask that any Member who wishes to submit posthearing questions to General Hickey or Mr. Muro, do so by this Friday so that this Committee can move forward with the nomination process as soon as possible.

With that, thank you very much to both of our witnesses today, and this hearing is officially adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:24 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]